

☹☹ *Depression is like Hell on Earth, it's dark, lonely and very selfish. The feeling of not wanting to live (but not wanting to die)... I can't get going and feel like I can't do anything... One thing about suffering from depression is that it's made me a better, stronger person.* ☹☹

What causes depression?

Depression varies very much from person to person and can happen for one or more reasons. Occasionally it may appear for no obvious reason.

Life events

In many cases, the first time someone becomes depressed, it has been triggered by an unwelcome or traumatic event, such as being sacked, divorced, or physically or sexually assaulted.

Loss

Often events or experiences that trigger depression can also be seen as a loss of some kind. It could be following the actual death of someone close, a major life change (such as moving house or changing jobs), or simply moving from one phase of life into another, e.g. as you reach retirement, children leave home, or you come to realise that you may never have a family of your own.

It's not just the negative experience that causes the depression, but how we deal with it. If the feelings provoked are not expressed or explored at the time, they fester and contribute towards depression.

Anger

In some cases some people call depression 'frozen anger'. You may have experienced something which left you feeling angry and helpless, and if you were unable to express your feelings at the time – perhaps because you were a child, or your feelings were unacceptable to others – the anger becomes internalised and is expressed as depression.

Diet

Poor diet and general lack of fitness can both contribute to depression.

In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that occasionally people become very depressed in response to some specific foods. Such a reaction is very individual, and people are often not aware of the particular food substance or drink that is causing the problem. But if you suddenly feel depressed for no apparent reason, it may be worth considering whether you have eaten or drunk something new, and whether this might have caused your sudden change of mood. If this is the cause, your mood should lift very quickly, so long as you don't consume any more of the particular item. (See the 'Food and mood' pages on the Mind website.)

Street drugs and alcohol

Although you may be very tempted to have a drink to cheer you up, alcohol is a depressant, and will tend to make you feel worse overall. Some street drugs can also make you depressed, especially if used repeatedly. (For more information, see *Understanding the mental health effects of street drugs*.)

Genetics

Although no specific genes for depression have been identified, it does seem to run in families to some extent, and some of us are more prone to depression than others. This could also be because we learn behaviour and ways of responding from our relatives, as well as inheriting our genes from them.

Chemical changes in the brain

Because antidepressants work by changing brain chemistry, many people have assumed that depression must be caused by changes in brain chemistry that are then 'corrected' by the drugs. Some doctors may tell you that you have a 'chemical imbalance' and need medication to correct it. But the evidence for this, apart from the effects of medication, is very weak, and if changes to brain chemistry occur, we don't know whether

these are the result of the depression or its cause. Although there are physical tests which are occasionally used in research on depression, they are not very accurate or consistent, and there are none that are done routinely to help make a diagnosis.

What can I do to help myself?

An important thing to accept is that there are usually no instant solutions to problems in life. Solving problems involves time, energy and work. When you are feeling depressed, you may not be feeling energetic or motivated to work. But if you are able to take an active part in your treatment, it should help in your situation.

Break the cycle of negativity

If you are starting to feel depressed it can be very easy to get into a cycle of automatic negative thoughts that then become difficult for you to challenge: you get depressed and then you get more depressed about being depressed. Being in a state of depression can then become a bigger problem than the actual difficulties that caused it in the first place.

You need to make a conscious effort to break the hold that the depression has on you. Deciding to do something to help yourself is the most important step you can take.

Try to recognise the pattern of negative thinking when you are doing it, and replace it with a more constructive activity. Look for things to do that occupy your mind. (Also see CBT on pp.13-14.)

Keep active

Research and individual personal experience show that regular exercise can be very effective in lifting your mood and increasing your energy levels, and it is also likely to improve your appetite and sleep. Physical activity stimulates chemicals in the brain called endorphins, which can help you to feel better.

- **Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)** helps to identify and change negative thoughts and feelings affecting your behaviour and, although often a short-term treatment, may last up to 12 months. For mild depression you may be offered computerised CBT, which uses a programme you can follow either by yourself or in addition to sessions with a therapist.
- **Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy** is an approach to wellbeing that involves accepting life, and living and paying attention to the present moment. It includes taking time to see what is happening around you in a non-judgmental way, rather than going over your problems again and again. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy is usually done in groups.

●● Mindfulness (s) a neat little trick that really helps and I wish I'd been taught it years ago. ●●

- **Behavioural activation** makes you look at the simple everyday tasks you may be avoiding and start doing them. Activity helps you to feel better, and once you have conquered some everyday tasks, you may feel ready to tackle some bigger ones. For example, you may have felt too depressed to do the washing up and let it pile up in the kitchen. The bigger the pile, the less you feel like doing it. Behavioural activation would encourage you to tackle it, even if you start by only doing some of it. As you do it, the dishes get clean, your kitchen gets tidier, and you feel a bit better about everything. Behavioural activation usually forms part of a CBT programme, but may be offered on its own.
- **Guided self-help** delivers a 6-8 week therapy programme through self-help books, under the guidance of a healthcare professional.
- **Interpersonal psychotherapy** focuses on relationships. Therapy can continue for 6 to 12 months.
- **Counselling**, which can be short- or long-term. This involves talking with someone who is trained to listen with empathy and acceptance. It allows you to express your feelings and helps you to find your own solutions to your problems.