

Depression is never really 'black and white' - Some facts about depression (English)

This fact sheet is part of the Multicultural Information Series by the Queensland Transcultural Mental Health Centre

Depression - what is it?

All people experience periods of sadness. Usually these last for only one to several hours or days. Often the cause of this lowered mood is obvious; sometimes it occurs for no reason. Some people experience more prolonged periods of sadness following the loss of a friend or family member. This is usually described as grief or bereavement.

A depressive illness is a persistent lowering of mood lasting for several weeks at a time, and accompanied by a specific group of physical and psychological symptoms. This may cause serious physical, psychological and social problems, and requires specific treatment.

What are the symptoms of depression?

Any of the following may be part of a depressive illness:

- feeling sad, crying easily
- sleep disturbance
- change in appetite and weight
- loss of interest and motivation
- loss of energy and becoming easily fatigued
- physical aches and pains, especially headache or abdominal pain
- loss of sexual interest, impotence
- feeling that life is not worth living
- feelings of helplessness
- guilt, and self reproachful thoughts
- pessimism regarding the future
- irritability
- anxiety
- confusion, poor memory
- alcohol or drug abuse.

How common is depression?

Depression is a very common illness. One in four women and one in six men in Australia suffer from a depressive illness during their lifetime. Many are unaware of the cause of their physical and psychological distress and do not receive treatment for it.

Are all types of depression the same?

Many different types of depressive illness exist. Often depression develops in response to illness, stress or losses of various types. Although 'understandable', this **reactive depression** many have serious consequences, and requires specialised and specific treatment.

The other major type of depression, **endogenous depression**, occurs for no obvious cause, and is due to changes in various brain chemicals, the neurotransmitters. Sometimes people with this biological type of depression also experience periods of elevated mood or highs. When both highs and depressed periods of mood occur, the mood disorder is termed **bipolar affective disorder**.

Who is vulnerable to depression?

All men and women are vulnerable to depression. Many groups are at particular risk. Factors predisposing to the development of depression include:

- old age
- being widowed, divorced and living alone
- chronic physical pain
- chronic pain
- alcohol or drug abuse
- women - pre-menstrual, menopausal, immediately after childbirth
- obsessional personality traits.

Do children suffer from depression?

Children may develop both biological (endogenous) and reactive depression. Symptoms in children may be the same as adults. In addition, depression in children may be manifested as:

- hyperactivity
- temper tantrums, anger, aggression
- school refusal
- unexplained physical complaints, especially abdominal pains, loss of control of bladder or bowel function.

Is depression treatable?

Like other illnesses, depression requires specific and specialised treatment. When **mild**, depression may be treated by various types of talking, or 'psychotherapies'. These may include individual or group therapy. Sometimes these can be given specific names, e.g. cognitive therapy, rational emotive therapy.

If **moderate** in severity, a depressive illness requires treatment with antidepressant medication. Several types of antidepressant drugs are available. Generally these need to be taken for 3—6 weeks before their full benefit is experienced, and should be continued for several months. Some drugs may have side effects such as dry mouth, sedation. These vary with the particular medication used. Recently, newer medications have been developed.

When **severe**, depression may not respond to talking therapies or medication, and other treatments such as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) may be required. At times a period of hospitalisation may be necessary.

Does depression recur?

Effective treatment of a depressive illness results in resolution of symptoms. Once symptoms of depression have resolved, antidepressant medications should be continued for several months or longer. Depressive illness can recur. If recurrence is severe and frequent, medication to prevent this may be prescribed.

Who should you see for advice?

If you, a friend or a member of your family have symptoms which suggest a depressive illness, you should contact your local doctor, community health centre or community mental health clinic. Your own doctor may treat you for this, or may refer you for more specialised treatment to a psychiatrist or psychologist.

This fact sheet is available in Arabic, Bosnian, Cambodian, Chinese, English, Greek, Italian, Polish, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, Tagalog and Vietnamese.

For more information

For more information, please contact the Queensland Transcultural Mental Health Centre.

Telephone: (07) 3317 1234

Email: QTMHC@health.qld.gov.au

Website: www.health.qld.gov.au/metrosouthmentalhealth/qtmhc/default.asp

Multicultural Information Series

Other titles available in the *Multicultural Information Series* include:

- Coping with mental illness in the family
- What is mental illness?