

COPING WITH DEPRESSION

Many people go through periods when they feel very sad, low or depressed. Often these periods of feeling depressed come after an upsetting, distressing event - like the death of someone close to you, the break-up of a relationship, loss of an important job, or a severe disappointment. A prison sentence - or an unexpectedly long prison sentence - can have exactly the same effect.

There are also people who become very low or depressed because of an exhausting or painful physical illness. More rarely, there are other people who become depressed for no apparent reason. Also, peoples' feelings of depression may be side-effects from medicines or street drugs which they are taking for other reasons. Sometimes a person can become depressed from a mixture of different causes.

It is very common to feel very depressed after coming off drugs and alcohol. Many people feel very low at this point. While some people feel better after some weeks after having stopped taking street drugs or alcohol, others get more depressed. Some people use drugs or alcohol to help avoid painful emotions or thinking about their problems. When the drink or drugs are stopped, the problems and the bad feelings may come back.

Mostly people recover fairly quickly from feeling low or depressed. They may get cheered up by the good things which still remain in their lives and gradually get over whatever had made them depressed.

But sometimes people seem to get stuck in their depressed feelings. They may get so depressed that they cannot see the good things which still remain in their lives. They may become too depressed to notice any opportunities which come their way, which otherwise might have cheered them up. Because they are depressed, they do not feel like doing much and thus do not do things which might make them happier. Because they are depressed, they may not feel like talking much to people around them so, after a while, other people may leave them alone. This may make them more depressed still. In this way depression can sometimes become worse and worse for some people.

Sometimes depression can steadily take a person over and can affect them like an illness. They may become very slowed down, lack energy, lose weight through lack of appetite, and sleep badly - in particular, wake up very early every morning. Their mind may become full of terrible thoughts about how hopeless everything is, how bad they are, and maybe how they wish to die. If depression has become so severe, a person will often need help to get out of the depression. Help often consists of anti-depressant drugs from a doctor, plus counselling.

Drug treatment for depression

One very important part of treatment is anti-depressant medication. There are now

various types of anti-depressant drugs and these often work well to lift someone's depression. Anti-depressant drugs need to be taken daily, probably for some months. These drugs do not lift your mood immediately. In the first few days after starting taking them, you are likely to notice yourself sleeping better and feeling calmer - you may even feel tired and weak. It is after a week or two of taking anti-depressants that you start to feel more alert and energetic. It may take up to eight weeks before you feel the full benefits from this type of drug.

If you are prescribed anti-depressant drugs, you can discuss how long you should take them with the doctor. The doctor can describe any side-effects of the particular type of anti-depressant you are being given. Often people take these drugs for some months at a time. They are not difficult to give up when the time comes to do without them.

Counselling

Counselling also can be very helpful for people who are depressed. Counselling is particularly helpful when given to someone who is taking anti-depressant drugs at the same time - a good combination of treatments. Discussions with your counsellor may help you to understand the problems and difficulties that triggered your feelings of depression. Counselling can also help through showing you different ways you could think about what is going on in your life, which might make you less depressed.

Ways you can help yourself out of your depression

As mentioned, depressed feelings can make you behave in ways which keep you depressed - for instance, avoiding people's company, not doing things which you normally enjoy, not doing much of anything in fact, and spending much of your time saying to yourself how bad your situation is. You can sometimes make yourself feel better by changing the way you pass your time. This is much easier said than done, when you are feeling really low. But, if your mood is already improving as a result of anti-depressant medication, you may be able to use some of the following methods for gradually getting out of depression.

Plan activities and pleasures in your everyday life

- Plan a timetable of activities for every day, so as to make yourself more active. Talk to a nurse, a Personal Officer who you trust or a Listener about things you could do - like exercise, association, education, reading. Try to draw up a timetable for each day, showing what activities you will take part in and any goals you set yourself for each activity (for instance, how many pages you will read). Try to stick to these plans closely, however low you feel at the time. To start with, do not make your plans or your goals too difficult. Aim to *gradually* make yourself more active.

- Think of what activities you normally enjoy. Try to plan ways of doing these more often - maybe some way you could do something you enjoy every day.
- Some people find physical exercise makes them feel better in every way. See whether this works for you. If you are not able to get to the gym much, you can try doing exercises in your cell. The PT teacher may be able to advise on suitable exercises.
- Generally aim to keep yourself busy - through doing a mixture of things which are enjoyable and things which are useful.

Avoid thinking and talking in ways which make you more depressed

- Try to stop yourself from sounding off to other people about how awful or impossible your problems are or what a terrible person you feel yourself to be. Talking like this will only make you more depressed.
- If there are particular problems which you are worried about, try to discuss them with someone you trust - maybe a Listener, a Personal Officer, a Chaplain or Health Care staff. Discuss problems, one at a time, in a practical, problem-solving way which looks for a positive answer as to what you can best do about the problem. Try not to feel worried about discussing how you feel with someone you trust. They are not there to criticize you but to listen to you. Feeling depressed is not a sign of failure.
- Set yourself some time each day when you think back on pleasant occasions in the past.
- Try to hold back from following trains of thought which go on and on about how dreadful is your present situation.

See if you notice any ways in which everyday activities affect your mood. Are there certain activities or conversations which leave you feeling better afterwards? Are there certain others which leave you feeling worse? Maybe you could seek out more of the things that make you feel better.

Getting a good night's sleep

People often sleep badly when they are depressed. But there are ways you can help yourself to sleep better – and better sleep helps to lift depression.

- Keep yourself awake and as active as you can during the day. Some people sleep a lot during the day, especially if they are locked up for a large part of the day with nothing to do. This makes it likely that they won't be tired enough to sleep properly at night. So get up at the same time each morning and keep yourself awake during the day. Take every opportunity you can to get out of your cell and take part in activities. If you are not able to get out much, try doing some exercises in your cell. The PE instructor may be able to advise you on what sort of exercises to do. Another leaflet in this series describes some exercises you can do in your cell.
- If you can, try and drink no more than 2 or 3 cups of coffee, tea, cocoa or hot chocolate each day, because these drinks all contain the chemical, caffeine, which keeps you awake. Try not to drink these after 4 pm because any caffeine drunk after 4 pm will still affect you by late evening.
- Do not lie awake at night for more than 30 minutes. Get up and do something like reading or listening to music, if you can do so without disturbing others. Do not lie down again until you feel sleepy.
- Ask your doctor or nurse for a relaxation exercise. Ask for further information on coping with sleep difficulties.

Encourage yourself to eat

You may need to encourage yourself to eat, because depression can take away appetite, and this in turn can make you feel worse. If you find eating difficult, eat small portions of food which you particularly like. Eat at your own speed and do not try to finish at the same time as other people with whom you are eating. Drink plenty of liquid, especially fruit juices and milkshakes if you can get them.

Reduced sexual feelings and Home Leave

Quite often, if someone is very depressed, they lose desire for sex for a while. If this is the case for you and you are going home on leave, you could explain to your partner that this is a symptom of depression or a side-effect of medication. You should make it clear that you have not lost affection for your partner - and that the problem should be temporary. If the problem continues, ask your doctor to consider changing your medication.

Encourage your own efforts to help yourself out of depression

Give yourself encouragement and praise for all your efforts to help yourself out of your depression. You really do deserve praise, because it can be so difficult, when depressed, to take even these simple constructive steps like keeping yourself busy or encouraging yourself to eat. Every day you should think back on what constructive steps you have taken and praise yourself for these. Even small steps forward are achievements truly to be proud of, when you have done them in spite of feeling very depressed.

For other sources of help, try telephoning or writing to....

one of the following organisations:

- *Depression Alliance*, 35 Westminster Bridge Rd, London SE1 7JB.
Answerphone: 020 7633 9929
- *The Association for Postnatal Illness*, 25 Jerdan Place, London SW6 7EB.
Tel: 020 7386 0868 (Mon to Fri 10 am–5 pm).
- *The Samaritans Helpline* 08457 909090 (24 hours) Support for those feeling lonely, despairing or suicidal
- *CALM* (for young men) Tel: 0800 585858 - 5pm-3am seven days per week.
- *National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux (NACAB)*, Myddelton House, 115-123 Pentonville Road, London N1 9LZ. 020 7833 2181. National office for the national network of Citizens Advice Bureaux, which provide free, confidential advice for the general public on a wide range of topics such as housing, benefits.
- *National Debtline* offers information and advice on debt. Birmingham Settlement, 318 Summer Lane, Birmingham B19 3RL. **Helpline 0808 808 4000** - 10am-4pm Mon and Thu, 10am-7pm Tue and Wed, 10am- 12 noon Fri

For other sources of information, try reading

one of the following books if the library can get it for you:

Managing Anxiety and depression: A Self Help Guide by N Holdsworth and R Paxton. Mental Health Foundation 1999 (short, cheap, very easy to read self help booklet)

Managing your mind: the mental fitness guide by Gillian Butler and Tony Hope. Oxford University Press, 1996 (self-help for depression, relationships, health and work)

Coping with Postnatal Depression by Fiona Marshall, Sheldon Press

The library may also be able to obtain audio-tapes that may be helpful.

Coping with Depression, Coping with Sleep Problems, Feeling Good (self-esteem/assertiveness), *Coping with Pain* available from Talking Life, PO Box 1, Wirral L47 7DD. Tel: 0151 632 0662. Fax: 0151 632 1206. (Information and self help)