

## Depression

### What is Depression?

Depression is a condition which is suffered by many people. Research has shown that 78% of college students will show symptoms of depression in any given year and 46% will seek some form of professional help.

The frequency, intensity and duration of symptoms are the criteria to determine whether someone is suffering from depression.

Extremes of negative mood or 'feeling blue' are not synonymous with depression. What are the symptoms associated with depression? There are at least nine symptoms associated with depression. People who are suffering from it will have at least five of these nearly every day all day for at least two weeks.

The symptoms present a change from the person's normal behaviour and ability to function. At least one of the symptoms displayed will be either:

- Depressed mood (feeling sad, blue, being tearful) or sometimes irritable mood or
  - Loss of interest or pleasure (feeling 'flat' or 'empty') in all or almost all activities s/he used to enjoy.
- The nine features of depression include:

- Depressed mood
- Loss of interest or pleasure in all or almost all activities normally enjoyed
- Significant weight loss or weight gain when not dieting, or decrease or increase in appetite
- Sleep disturbance - either trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- Feeling restless or slowed down
- Decreased energy or feeling tired
- Feelings of worthlessness, self-reproach or inappropriate guilt
- Diminished ability to think, concentrate, remember or make decisions
- Recurrent thoughts of death, recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt, or a specific plan for committing suicide.

Features also include headaches and other aches/pains, digestive problems, sexual problems, anxiety and excessive worry, feeling pessimistic or hopeless.

## **What are the causes of depression?**

No one simple factor causes depression. There usually appears to be more than one reason. They vary from person to person.

These include:

- People with a family history of depression have an increased probability of having depression because of individual make-up including body chemistry or because of certain early experiences
- Distressing events and surrounding circumstances can contribute to depression. For example, if we are alone and friendless and have many other worries we may get seriously depressed whereas in happier times we can cope
- Depression is a common accompaniment to physical illness, especially those which are life-threatening like cancer or heart disease. Similarly depressive episodes appear to occur more often in individuals with a history of drug dependence and certain psychiatric conditions
- A person's deeper beliefs and assumptions can predispose him or her to depression. In effect, depressed people's thoughts include three key elements:
  - a concept of themselves as in some way worthless, failed or to blame for their own or other people's plight
  - a view that the world is devoid of pleasure or gratification and that immense barriers block access to goals
  - a view that the future is hopeless.

## **Depression in College**

Among students, every case of depression is affected by different things. Depression can occur regardless of the person's family history, background, medical history and life circumstances. The developmental issues in question involve:

- changes in the balance between the capacity for independence and availability of emotional support
- over-reliance on external standards of success at the expense of one's own ideals, abilities or health. Fluctuations in self-esteem usually reflect difficulties in these areas.

Instances of depression in college students are usually associated with recent stressful events. Most depressed students exhibit a depressed mood associated with feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness and anxiety.

These symptoms occur within three months of a clearly definable stress - for example, poor academic achievement, the break-up of a relationship or financial problems.

The event upsets the balance between autonomy and connectedness and this, in turn, may impair self-esteem. Sleep and appetite disturbances may occur but the full range of somatic symptoms of

depression are absent. Although all the symptoms may not be present, the depression is severe enough to interfere with work and social activity.

Treatment is a combination of cognitive counselling with a developmental approach. Recovery is relatively quick.

### **If I think I may have depression, where can I get help?**

If you have symptoms of depression that are getting in the way of your ability to function with your studies and your social life, ask for help. Depression can get better with care and treatment.

Don't wait for depression to go away by itself or think you can manage it all on your own, and don't ignore how you're feeling. As a college student, you're busy—but you need to ask for help.

If you don't ask for help, depression may get worse and contribute to other health problems, while robbing you of the academic and social enjoyment and success that brought you to college in the first place.

Remember, the DBS has a referral service that provides help with all of the above symptoms.

### **What treatment is available for depression?**

There are two approaches to treatment; these can be combined or used separately.

- **Counselling/psychotherapy:** this involves talking about your feelings to a professional therapist who listens, understands and helps you explore the possible reasons and manage your depression.
- **Antidepressant medication:** this is prescribed by a doctor. When the depression is severe or of long duration, antidepressants are very effective and need to be taken for a period of four to six months. Antidepressants have some side effects that may last for a short period of time. Consult fully with your doctor in relation to this treatment.

### **What else can I do?**

Besides seeing a doctor and a counselor, you can also help your depression by being patient with yourself and good to yourself. Don't expect to get better immediately, but you will feel yourself improving gradually over time.

- Daily exercise, spending time outside in nature and in the sun, and eating healthy foods can also help you feel better.
- Get enough sleep. Try to have consistent sleep habits and avoid all-night study sessions.
- Your counselor may teach you how to be aware of your feelings and teach you relaxation techniques. Use these when you start feeling down or upset.
- Avoid using drugs and at least minimize, if not totally avoid alcohol.
- Break up large tasks into small ones, and do what you can as you can; try not to do too many things at once.

- Try to spend time with supportive family members or friends, and take advantage of resources, such as support groups. Talking with your parents, guardian, or other students who listen and care about you gives you support.
- Try to get out with friends and try fun things that help you express yourself. As you recover from depression, you may find that even if you don't feel like going out with friends, if you push yourself to do so, you'll be able to enjoy yourself more than you thought.

Remember that, by treating your depression, you are helping yourself succeed in college and after graduation