

TIP SHEET FOR DEPRESSION



THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEWCASTLE
AUSTRALIA

STUDENT SUPPORT

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Am I suffering from depression?

Life has its ups and downs. It is normal to react to these events. We may be disappointed by the mark we get for an assignment, feel misunderstood by a close friend or be filled with self-doubt when our confidence is shaken. These feelings usually go away within a day or two. It is when feelings of intense sadness continue for weeks and begin to interfere with our daily functioning, that we may be suffering from depression. It is not a mood that we can 'snap out' of.

People experience depression in different ways. However, common symptoms may be divided into four groups. Not everyone experiences all these symptoms.

- behavioural (no longer taking an interest in things that once gave you pleasure; social withdrawal; neglecting your responsibilities; finding everything more of an effort)
- emotional (being easily upset or irritated; feeling flat, anxious, angry, guilty or sad);
- physical (changes to sleeping and/or eating patterns; aches/pains; having little energy)
- cognitive (being unable to concentrate, make decisions or remember things; being self-critical; having frequent thoughts about suicide or death).

Sometimes there seems to be a reason behind the depression and sometimes not. Being able to identify a cause may bring relief to some people, while others feel frustrated that understanding why they are depressed doesn't make them feel any better. With depression, feelings are overwhelming at times. One of the cruelest tricks that depression can play is to convince a person that there is little hope things will change or that feeling bad is how life really is. The path to recovery can involve being aware of this trick and "noticing the light" or the hopeful, positive, energy-giving thoughts or things that go on around us from day to day.

What can I do to help myself?

A combination of different strategies is likely to alleviate depression. Your job is to experiment with the suggestions listed below and find out what works for you. Think about what has worked for you in the past and try to persist with just one or two changes, noticing how your chosen strategies affect how you are feeling. Observe yourself and identify those connections which influence how you are feeling. Remember that part of being depressed can be that everything requires more effort so be gentle with yourself and don't aim to change too much too quickly.

Take care of your physical health

Have a check up with your doctor to make sure that there is no physical reason for your symptoms. Be aware of your diet and eat regular small meals. Try to eat a nourishing breakfast and prepare this the night before if mornings are more difficult for you. Make yourself get out of bed and get into the natural daylight, preferably going for a walk or maybe sitting outside as you plan your day. Avoid alcohol and drugs. Alcohol is a depressant and recreational drugs can also make depression much worse. Reduce caffeine intake. Physical activity has repeatedly been shown to help with depressed mood. Plan to do some exercise every day and be pleased with yourself on the days when you manage to go for a walk or do some gardening or more strenuous housework. Read the tip sheet about 'Managing Sleep Difficulties'. Get up at a regular time, make your bed immediately, and don't nap during the day.

Challenge negative thinking

Write down the thoughts that take over your thinking when you are depressed. Are you judging yourself harshly? What would a caring friend say about you or the situation which is causing you distress? Hear their comforting voice saying those words to you. It is how we think about the event which influences how we react, not the event itself. Notice what your thoughts are saying to you. If you are thinking: "I am stupid", take a step back and change your thought to: "At the moment I am having the thought that I am stupid". Practise attaching "At the moment I am having the thought that..." to those unhelpful negative thoughts.

Be proactive

Keeping busy is often helpful. Visit friends. Offer to help someone. Take up a hobby. Listen to music. Join a club or sports team. Learn to say “no”. Have a long, warm bath. Read a magazine or novel. Cook a meal. Plan a dinner party. Go to the movies. Break down your study-related tasks into manageable small steps, start with the easiest step, and take a break after achieving each step. Keep attending lectures and tutorials.

Talk to someone

Make the effort to contact a friend. Share how you are feeling with someone you trust. Ask them to listen to you and let them know that you are not necessarily looking for answers or advice. Be honest with them. Allow them to care for you. It is very important to keep connected with supportive family and friends.

Seek professional help

When depression is severe and persistent, medication is often very effective. Severe depression is an illness with changes in levels of chemicals in the brain (neurotransmitters). Antidepressants reverse some of these changes. Because they work in this way, you must take them every day and most people need to take them for at least six months. Antidepressants are not addictive and combined with counselling they achieve the best outcomes in the treatment of some forms of depression.

It may be helpful to think about the following analogy to understand the different treatment strategies for depression. Imagine a beach where there is a pier stretching into the sea. Imagine that you are in the sea, near the pier. When you are depressed, it can feel as though you are struggling hard just to keep afloat and stop yourself from drowning. You are working so hard that you haven't noticed a ladder attached to the pier. Medication can help to keep your chin above the water so that you notice the ladder. Your own strategies will help you to climb up the ladder, out of the sea, and walk back to the beach.

Where can I get help from others?

- Talk to a counsellor at the Newcastle campus (4921 5801) or at the Central Coast campus (4348 4060).
- Make an appointment to see your doctor.
- Lifeline 131 114 offers a 24-hour service.
- The Psychiatric Emergency Centre (1 800 655 085) for the Hunter region or the Central Intake (4320 3500) for the Central Coast area are also 24-hour services.
- Lifeline has an information line 'Just Ask' Mon-Fri 9am-5pm (1 300 131 114)
- Men's Helpline Australia is staffed by trained male counsellors experienced in helping men who find it difficult to talk about issues (1 300 78 99 78)

What other resources are available?

Websites:

www.moodgym.anu.edu MoodGYM consists of a number of interactive modules which are designed to be completed in order. They are based on the principles of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and Interpersonal Therapy and can be worked through, free of charge, at your own pace.

www.beyondblue.org.au This site has several helpful fact sheets about depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder and post-natal depression. It also presents the opportunity to share stories with others, and gives information about other services.

www.blackdoginstitute.org.au The Black Dog Institute is an educational, research, clinical and community-oriented facility dedicated to improving the understanding, diagnosis and treatment of mood disorders.

www.depressionnet.com.au Here you will find resources to locate help and healthcare professionals as well as information about causes, symptoms and various treatment options in managing depression.

Books:

Yapko, M. (1997). Breaking the patterns of depression. New York: Doubleday.

Burns, D. (1999). Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy. Sydney: Harper Collins.

Parker, G. (2002). Dealing with Depression. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Aisbett, B. (2000). Taming the Black Dog. Sydney: Harper Collins.

Tanner, S. & Ball, J. (1999). Beating the Blues. Sydney: Tower Books.

Gilbert, P. (2001). Overcoming the Depression: A Step-by-Step Approach to gaining control over Depression. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to University counselling services in Australia and overseas whose resources have been used to help compile these Tip Sheets.