

## Depression in young people

The adolescent years are a key time for social and emotional development for young people. It is often during this period that mental illness will first occur; with 50% of all lifetime cases of mental illness starting by age 14, and 75% by age 24. An estimated 6.3% of Australians aged 16-24 experience depression in any year, and around 25% of young people will have had a depressive disorder by the end of their adolescence. Depression is one of the leading causes of impairment, ill-health and reduced functioning among 15-24 year olds, much greater than car accidents.

Depression is a serious mental illness that encompasses more than someone feeling sad or unhappy. At times everyone can experience sadness brought on by major incidents such as a breakup or loss of a loved one. However for young people with depressive disorders, these feelings can have a significant impact on behaviour and academic performance – whether they are temporary changes to wellbeing, or more severe and long-lasting symptoms associated with a mental illness. Young females are more likely than young males to experience depression, however young males generally find it much harder to ask for help or talk about what they are experiencing. Ultimately, depression can limit a person's social and vocational opportunities through its effects on mood and schooling.

More pronounced feelings of depression can occur when people have experienced severe or prolonged stress, or can arise without any obvious stress. These feelings can be temporary and may resolve over time by themselves, or they can develop into clinical depression which is more severe and long-lasting.

People who have feelings of depression can benefit from talking to a school counsellor or other professional for support. If necessary, this person will be able to refer the adolescent on to a doctor or a specialised health service. Teachers can help in this process by being able to identify young people who may have feelings of depression and knowing who they can contact for help in the first instance.

## Signs of depression in young people

Feelings of depression can manifest differently between individuals and throughout the lifespan. They can occur in association with other emotional or physical changes. You might be particularly concerned about a young person if they show several of these feelings or behaviours over a two week period or more:

- Frequently seeming upset, sad, anxious or negative;
- Being overly irritable, angry or aggressive;
- Crying or losing temper easily or frequently;
- Becoming withdrawn and isolated from others;
- Becoming involved in risky or criminal behaviour;
- Increased use of alcohol or other drugs;
- A decline in energy and enthusiasm;
- Not enjoying things they usually like doing;
- A decline in academic interest and performance;
- Talking or writing about sadness, death, suicide or self-harm; and
- Self-harming behaviour or suicide attempts.

## Types of depressive illness

Different types of depression can have different symptoms and may require different treatments. The following are some terms which may be used in describing depressive illnesses:

- Major Depression - can appear without apparent cause or be triggered by a distressing event. Features can include sleep disturbances, appetite or weight changes, sadness, irritability, loss of interest in work or hobbies, loss of sexual interest, fatigue, poor concentration, difficulty making decisions, guilt, poor self-esteem and suicidal thoughts. Symptoms are persistent and severe, significantly interfering with daily activities.



- Postnatal Depression - affects up to 20% of mothers in the weeks and months following birth. Emotions include anxiety, fear, sadness, worthlessness, panic attacks, irritability and difficulty in coping with demands. There may also be a change in appetite and sleep patterns, more than would normally be expected with a new baby.
- Depression with Psychotic Features - a person may have symptoms of depression and also experience psychosis - a cluster of symptoms in which the person loses touch with reality. Some people may stop eating and drinking, or may experience hallucinations (e.g. visions or voices) and/or delusions (e.g. believing they are being followed or persecuted).
- Bipolar Disorder (previously called Manic Depression) - extremes of mood, with periods of very low or depressed mood alternating with periods of mania (extreme happiness, overactivity, rapid speech, lack of inhibition). These extreme moods can be very disruptive. People can also experience periods of psychosis.

## What causes depressive illness?

Factors linked to depression include body chemistry (hormonal factors or brain chemistry), seasonal influences (for example winter), negative life events, stress, genetics, or personality factors (such as negative coping styles). Depression is a complex group of illnesses and it is likely that in most cases, a combination of individual, family, social, and cultural factors is responsible. Research suggests that some people inherit a genetic susceptibility to depression and become ill in response to negative environments or life events.

## How is depressive illness treated?

The treatment recommended will depend on the type and severity of the depressive illness a person is experiencing, as well as their own preferences. In general, the earlier treatment is sought the better the outcome is likely to be. It is particularly important to seek urgent treatment if a

person is thinking about suicide. The following treatments may be used alone or in combination:

- Counselling or Psychotherapy - to assist people to sort out practical problems and conflicts, and to help them understand the reasons for their depression. There are a range of therapies and techniques used in the treatment of depression; a commonly used therapy is Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) in which people learn to challenge negative self-talk and assumptions.
- Anti-Depressant Medications - to relieve depressive symptoms, restore normal patterns of sleep and appetite, and reduce anxiety, which helps people to work through personal issues. Anti-depressants are not addictive but some do have side effects, so it may take time to find the best medication for an individual. Certain types of anti-depressants are not recommended for children or young people, because of concern that they may precipitate suicidal thoughts and behaviour in some adolescents.
- Electro-Convulsive Therapy (ECT) - involves the application of an electric current to the brain under safe and controlled conditions. It is usually reserved for severe depression that is not responding to other forms of therapy. It may have side effects, such as short term memory loss, but can be a life-saving procedure in those who are very depressed.

The best approach for most people is a combination of anti-depressants and psychotherapy. Lifestyle changes such as exercise, a healthy diet and minimal drugs and alcohol are also important. Certain disorders such as bipolar disorder and depression with psychotic symptoms may require the use of different or additional medications.

Many people have only a single episode of depression, while others find that it is a recurrent illness that they need to manage more actively throughout their life. Most people with depression will be treated in the community, but those with more complex or severe depression, or people who are at risk of suicide, may need a stay in hospital.



## Importance for teachers

### Working with young people who have depression

As a teacher, you may work with a young person, parent or colleague who is feeling depressed or recovering from a depressive illness.

If you suspect that a young person is feeling depressed, approach him or her and ask how things have been going. If their answer or attitude backs up your concerns, encourage them to visit the school counsellor or a youth worker, or talk to a staff member who has responsibility for student wellbeing.

If you have particular concerns and the student does not seem ready to seek help, you could approach the school counsellor, or school executive yourself for advice on how to proceed. If you suspect that an adult has depression, encourage them to seek professional help from their general practitioner (GP) or a counsellor.

If you are working with young people who are depressed this may raise different feelings or reactions such as:

- Rejection - feeling that the person's behaviour is unacceptable and that they are exaggerating their symptoms - for example, feeling like "it's all in their mind." Remember that depression can be a debilitating feeling or an illness and that the person may be unable to change their emotions or behaviour at present.
- Depression - people who are in contact with someone experiencing depression may feel unable to help and feel somewhat depressed themselves. Sometimes, a person may realise they are experiencing depressive symptoms themselves, after seeing these symptoms in another person. If you find yourself in this situation, seek support from friends, colleagues, a school or staff counsellor or a general practitioner.

Here are some strategies to use when you may have a student in your class who is experiencing or recovering from depression:

- Where appropriate, share information with the child or young person's parents and other professionals who may be involved in supporting the child. This could include details on the side effects of medication, strategies that are being used at home and sharing progress on the child at school;
- Work with the student and other school staff to support the young person to re-adjust back to school life, particularly if they have been absent for a period of time. This may include revising work activities and tasks, providing additional time to complete work, negotiated attendance, more frequent breaks;
- Avoid statements such as "things can't be that bad" and "everything will be OK," as the person with depression might feel that you don't really understand. Also monitor other students in the class and challenge when they may make statements such as these;
- Gently challenge any negative assumptions the young person might make about themselves, or those brought up by other students, or an issue you are discussing and suggest a different perspective;
- Reinforce the student's strengths and positive attributes, to help them feel more positive about themselves. Use positive communication strategies and feedback;
- Identify the student's interests and abilities, and help them to set small and achievable goals;
- Provide opportunities for the young person to aim for and achieve success including recognising small achievements. This can be both academically in class and socially with peers or in other activities e.g. sports, drama.
- Encourage the young person to be involved in classroom tasks and group work, as well as activities



outside the classroom, which support social interaction;

- Focus classroom discussions and activities on promoting problem solving skills, resilience and recognising and accepting difference and belonging; and
- Have strategies in place to manage and monitor the child or young person's behaviour.

It is important to keep in mind that teacher's and educational staff, are in a key position to interact with, support and influence a young person. For a child or young person experiencing a depressive illness, being in a supportive environment, such as at school can significantly impact on their ability to cope and their success at school.

## Sources and Links

The following websites provide comprehensive and useful information about depression. Some include accounts from people who have experienced depressive illness, as well as opportunities to contribute to discussion groups or ask questions.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2008). *2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of results (4326.0)*. Canberra: ABS.

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)*. Washington: American Psychiatric Association.

beyondblue: [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

Black Dog Institute:

[www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/docs/Depressioninadolescentsandyoungpeople.pdf](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/docs/Depressioninadolescentsandyoungpeople.pdf)

BluePages: [bluepages.anu.edu.au](http://bluepages.anu.edu.au)

DepressioNet: [depressionet.org.au](http://depressionet.org.au)

KidsMatter: [www.kidsmatter.edu.au/families/mental-health-difficulties/depression/depression-suggestions-families](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/families/mental-health-difficulties/depression/depression-suggestions-families)

Orygen Youth Health:

[oyh.org.au/sites/oyh.org.au/files/factsheets/oyh\\_factsheet\\_dep.pdf](http://oyh.org.au/sites/oyh.org.au/files/factsheets/oyh_factsheet_dep.pdf)

What is Depression?

[www.abc.net.au/health/library/stories/2007/06/05/1944066.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/health/library/stories/2007/06/05/1944066.htm)

Youth beyondblue:

[www.youthbeyondblue.com/understand-what's-going-on/depression](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com/understand-what's-going-on/depression)