

Understanding
Depression

Dr Kwame McKenzie

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IMPORTANT

This book is intended not as a substitute for personal medical advice but as a supplement to that advice for the patient who wishes to understand more about his or her condition.

Before taking any form of treatment
YOU SHOULD ALWAYS CONSULT YOUR MEDICAL PRACTITIONER.

In particular (without limit) you should note that advances in medical science occur rapidly and some information about drugs and treatment contained in this booklet may very soon be out of date.

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Introduction

What is depression?

We all have low moods from time to time. For instance, if a relationship breaks up we may feel shocked, we may cry, go off our food, get angry and irritable, sleep poorly, and get tetchy and anxious. Usually, the mood passes after a few days and we get back to our normal way of living. We may say that we have been 'depressed', 'down in the dumps', 'fed up' or have had the 'blues'.

But low moods like this are not what doctors call depression. Instead, they use the term to describe a more severe illness that a person has had for at least a few weeks, affecting the body as well as the mind. It can come on for no reason at all and may sometimes be life threatening. No one symptom indicates whether you have just a low mood or what some people call 'clinical depression'. Many of the symptoms are similar; however, when you are depressed they are usually more intense and go on for longer.

A simple rule of thumb is that, if your low mood affects all parts of your life, lasts for two weeks or

brings you to the point of thinking about suicide, you should seek help. Try to remember that depression is an illness that can be treated and you will feel better in time.

Ninety per cent of people with depression are treated by their GP and you shouldn't worry that he or she will think it a sign of weakness. Family doctors have years of experience in dealing with depression and are trained to diagnose and treat it. They may prescribe tablets, but will probably also tell you about self-help organisations, counselling and psychotherapy or relaxation techniques. You may get advice on ways of decreasing your stress or coming to terms with a bereavement or other loss. GPs are a mine of information.

But if you do not feel that you can talk to your doctor, talk with a friend. You will be surprised how many people have experience of depression either first hand or because they know someone who has been depressed. They may be able to give you support and advice but, even if they just listen, talking to someone usually helps.

How common is depression?

Many famous people have suffered from depression, including Abraham Lincoln, Queen Victoria and Winston Churchill, who called depression his 'black dog'.

Many writers and actors have suffered from depression and the comedian Spike Milligan wrote a book about his depressive illness, *Depression and How to Survive It*.

Facts about depression

- At least one in five adults will suffer from depression in their lifetime.
- Each year doctors diagnose two million cases in the UK.
- On average, each GP in the UK sees one patient with depression a day.
- Depression affects all age groups.
- Women are diagnosed as suffering from it twice as often as men.

There has been an increase in the rates of depression over the last 40 years which may be the result of the way we live our lives now. For many people, the world is becoming increasingly stressful and stress can lead to depression. Increases in divorce rates and crime rates, longer working hours for some and unemployment for others are just some of the factors that make life a strain for those affected.

Where we live may be important for our risk of depression too. One study showed that people who live in an inner-city area are twice as likely to be depressed as those who live in the Hebrides. Although it has proved difficult to find an exact reason for this, it is clear that your environment is important to your risk of depression.

The good news is that no matter what the cause of depression it can be treated and treated effectively. Most people who are depressed and get treatment get better.

KEY POINTS

- Low moods are thought of as depression if they persist and affect all parts of your life
- Depression is common
- Depression can be treated effectively

What is depression?

An illness of mind and body

Depression is an illness of mind and body. Most people have both physical and psychological symptoms, but their exact nature will vary from one person to another. Different symptoms will be more or less prominent in each person's illness. Some people report no symptoms at all but begin behaving in an unusual way – for example, one previously law-abiding woman who came to my clinic had started shop-lifting when she became depressed.

Psychological symptoms

Low mood

Despite the use of the label depression, not everyone with this illness feels low. Some are anxious, some say they are emotionally numb and some have no mood changes but come to their doctor with unexplained physical symptoms or with a change in behaviour.

Low mood in depression is much more intense than the way you feel when you are disappointed or just

Symptoms of depression

Depression has a wide range of possible psychological and physical symptoms. What one person experiences as symptoms of depression may well be very different to what another person experiences.

Psychological

- Low mood
- Loss of interest in things you used to enjoy
- Anxiety
- Emotional numbness
- Depressive thinking
- Concentration and memory problems
- Delusions
- Hallucinations
- Suicidal impulse

Physical

- Sleep problems – difficulty getting to sleep, waking up early or sleeping too much
- Mental and physical slowing
- Increase or decrease in appetite
- Increase or decrease in weight
- Loss of interest in sex
- Tiredness
- Constipation
- Menstrual period irregularities

fed up. It is a persistent feeling of sadness, emptiness, loss and dread. Some say it is like living with a cloud over you and it takes over every part of your life.

Diurnal variations

In moderate or severe depression, low mood is often worse in the morning and improves slightly during the day – though it never goes. This is called diurnal variation.

Anhedonia

Low mood makes it impossible to enjoy anything and you may even lose interest in your hobbies. Nothing brings you pleasure. Doctors call this symptom anhedonia.

In some milder depressions low mood may be worse in the evenings than in the mornings and there may be the odd good day. However, these are outnumbered by the bad ones. If depression is mild you may be able to enjoy other people's company – though without stimulation you would soon become disenchanted again.

With the low mood comes a tendency to cry more often, with the slightest upset or even with no upset at all.

Anxiety

When we feel threatened, a hormone called adrenaline is released and blood is directed to our muscles and brain so that we can think quickly and flee if we need to. We feel on edge, jumpy and tense but, if nothing happens, the feeling passes off in a few minutes. In someone who is depressed, these anxious feelings can last for months.

Some people wake in the morning in a state of high anxiety because they dread the day ahead. Anxiety can outweigh low mood and be the most prominent



symptom in depression. If you are in a state of anxiety you may find that you get irritable and snap a lot which is obviously difficult for other people to live with as well as for you.

Emotional numbness

Some people who are severely depressed say that they feel like they have completely lost their emotions and this is one of the most distressing symptoms of depression. You feel numb. You can't cry and you feel like there are no tears left. You may not feel that you are part of the world because you do not think that you have feelings. You may feel distant and unfeeling about even people very close to you such as your partner, family or children.

Depressive thinking

Your thinking changes when you are suffering from depression. You see the world differently and

everything appears in a negative light. This distorted view simply reinforces the depression.

You may blame yourself for unfortunate events more than you should while not allowing yourself to take credit for things that you have done well. The good things that you have done throughout your life are forgotten and the bad are vividly remembered and blown up out of all proportion.

You may find yourself concentrating on the negative detail and ignoring the bigger picture. To take an extreme example, someone who had passed an exam with 99 per cent might ignore the good result and concentrate on the one per cent that they got wrong.

You may also start jumping to negative conclusions and jumping to general conclusions from single events.

Depressive thinking

Depressive thinking makes a person see the world in a negative light. There are three elements to depressive thinking:

1. Negative thoughts, for example, 'I am a failure at work'
2. High, unreasonable expectations, for example, 'I cannot be happy unless everyone likes me and thinks I am good at my job'
3. Mistakes in thinking, for example:
 - (a) jumping to negative conclusions
 - (b) focusing on negative details of a situation and ignoring the good bits
 - (c) coming to a general conclusion on the basis of a single incident
 - (d) coming to the conclusion that things that are nothing to do with you are your fault

For instance, a fashion model I once treated thought that she was ugly and everyone hated her because a man who passed her in the street gave her a funny look.

These sorts of negative thinking patterns undermine you. They lead to worry, a lack of confidence and feelings of worthlessness, and your world becomes full of gloomy thoughts, self-doubt and anxieties. As a result, you feel more depressed or anxious and so a vicious circle is set up.

Case history: Carrie

Carrie is a secretary; her boss is late for the train and on his way out says, 'Could you type this report up for me, I have made a few corrections'. Carrie is depressed, and because of this she thinks she is a failure. She believes that she has to correct the report because she is bad at her job. She becomes more



depressed because she has the unreasonable expectation that she must be perfect in her job if she is to enjoy her life.

In reality, she is good at her job but she doesn't think so. She concentrates on little things that go wrong rather than the big things that go right. She forgets the fact that she was given a pay rise because her company value her so much. She also ignores the fact that her boss is known to be indecisive and always changes reports that he has written. She concentrates on the negative details and jumps to a general conclusion based on a single incident – this makes her depressed.

While she is typing the report another thought comes to her: 'Could the boss be late because he had to correct my sloppy work? If the deal falls through it will be all my fault!' She blames herself for things that are not her fault which fuels her depression.

Concentration and memory problems

If you are consumed by worries and depressive thoughts it can be difficult to think about anything else. You may find it difficult to concentrate and this leads to problems. You have to concentrate on something to remember it, so it is not surprising that poor concentration and memory problems go together. Problems with concentration also lead to indecision and inattention; you may feel muddled and confused. These can be so severe as to be mistaken for dementia.

Delusions and hallucinations

Delusions

If you should become severely depressed, your thinking can become so distorted that you lose touch with

reality. Your mind can start playing tricks on you and you may even fear that you are going mad. You are not; you are severely depressed and will get better with treatment. Delusions can occur in severe depression; thankfully, they are rare (because they are so distressing).

A delusion is a false belief which is held unshakably by the person who has it. In depression delusions reflect and reinforce the depressed mood as happened with James whom I treated some time ago. He believed that he should give himself up to the police because he had left a shop without paying for an apple by mistake five years previously. He thought that the police were looking for him and that there was no way out. He believed that he had brought shame on his family and was worthless. It was impossible to make him believe that he was not public enemy number one, that anyone could make a mistake and that no one would be bothered about it.

Other people believe that they are the most wicked person in the world or that people want to get rid of them because they are so bad. Some people believe that they have no money at all, others that they are decaying or even that they are dead. There are as many different types of delusion as there are ideas in the human mind but all of them reflect the depressed mood and depressive thinking.

Hallucinations

Whereas delusions are false thoughts, hallucinations involve perceiving things that are not real – usually sounds. For example, some severely depressed people hear voices when there is no one there. The voices sound like people in the room talking to them and are frighteningly real. The voices may criticise them or tell

them that they are bad. The voices reinforce the depression. Some people see or smell things that are not there but this is rarer.

Suicidal impulses

When you are in the depths of depression the past looks bad and full of mistakes, the present is awful and you dread the future. Some come to the conclusion that life is not worth living, that everyone would be better off without them and that they should take their own life.

Many depressed people think about suicide – even if it is just a passing thought. Many do not actually contemplate committing suicide but go to bed at night hoping that they will not wake up, and so get away from the terrible torture of living.



Most people decide that they can't do it, perhaps because it would be too drastic, or the effect it would have on their family or because of religious beliefs. Some people come to the conclusion that they have not done it because they are cowards and this makes them feel even more ashamed and depressed.

If you think about suicide you are at risk of doing it. Get help urgently: see a GP, go to an accident and emergency department or call the Samaritans. Depression can be treated.

Physical symptoms

Depression can cause a number of physical symptoms. Those people affected often come to the conclusion that they have a physical illness because they feel so tired and off-colour or are in pain.

Sleep problems

Sleep problems are common in depression and are sometimes partially to blame for the tiredness that may



be experienced. If you are suffering from a moderate or severe depression you may wake up in the morning hours earlier than usual and then find it impossible to get back to sleep. All depressed people can find it difficult to get to sleep because they worry and may suffer from broken nights – waking up a number of times before the morning.

Mental and physical slowing

If you are depressed you may feel like a machine that is seizing up. You feel tired all the time, it is hard to perform everyday chores, everything is an effort and it seems as if everything is slowed down. Your speech may be slow and monotonous and you may even move slowly. Doctors call this psychomotor retardation.

Sometimes body functions slow down or seize up as well. You may find that you have a dry mouth or that you become constipated; some women stop having menstrual periods or they may become irregular.

Loss of appetite

When you are depressed you can lose quite a lot of weight. Food seems unappetising and bland and you don't even feel hungry. Some people with severe depression stop eating and drinking completely, but this is rare.

Reverse physical symptoms

Instead of the normal physical symptoms of depression such as poor sleep, loss of appetite and loss of weight, some people have what are known as reverse physical symptoms. They sleep more, have a bigger appetite and gain weight. If you feel low in mood and have these symptoms you should see your doctor.