

## Distinguishing depression from an occasional 'down' mood

Depression is a common experience. We have all felt 'depressed' about a friend's cold shoulder, misunderstandings in our marriage, tussles with teenage children—sometimes we feel 'down' for no reason at all.

However, depression can become an illness when

- the mood state is severe
- it lasts for two weeks or more
- it interferes with your ability to function at home or at work



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8am-5pm Monday to Friday (NZ time)

# Depression

## \* Symptoms of depression

Signs of a depressed mood include

- Lowered self-esteem (or self-worth)
- Change in sleep patterns, that is, insomnia or broken sleep or excessive sleep
- Change in appetite or weight
- Less ability to control emotions such as pessimism, anger, guilt, irritability and anxiety
- Varying emotions throughout the day, for example, feeling worse in the morning and better as the day progresses
- Reduced capacity to experience pleasure: you can't enjoy what's happening now, nor look forward to anything with pleasure, hobbies and interests drop off
- Reduced pain tolerance: you are less able to tolerate aches and pains and may have a host of new ailments
- Changed sex drive: absent or reduced
- Poor concentration and memory: some people are so impaired that they think they are going demented
- Reduced motivation: it doesn't seem worth the effort to do anything, things seem meaningless
- Lowered energy levels

## \* When to seek help for depression

If you have the feelings described above and they persist for most of every day for two weeks or longer, and interfere with your ability to manage at home and at work, then you might benefit from getting an assessment by a skilled professional.

Having one or other of these features, by themselves, is unlikely to indicate depression. However there could be other causes which may warrant medical assessment.

If you are feeling suicidal, it is very important to seek immediate help, preferably from a mental health practitioner.

## \* Key points to remember

- Feeling depressed occasionally is a common experience
- If feelings of depression are severe, last for two weeks or more, and functioning at home or at work is impaired, a professional assessment should be sought
- If feeling suicidal, seek immediate help from a mental health practitioner such as a general practitioner, a psychiatrist or a psychologist

## \* Expected outcome

Generalised anxiety can be controlled with treatment. Overcoming anxiety often results in a richer, more satisfying life.

\* **Possible complications**

- Untreated anxiety may lead to neuroses, such as phobias, compulsions or hypochondriasis
- A sudden increase in anxiety may lead to panic and violent escape behaviour
- Anxiety is often associated with depression
- Dependence on drugs
- Heart arrhythmias

\* **Treatment/post procedure care, general measures**

- Some tests may be done to rule out medical conditions that produce anxiety, such as hyperthyroidism. Tests are usually normal
- Obtain counselling to understand the specific, but unconscious threat or source of stress
- Learn techniques, including biofeedback and relaxation therapy, to reduce muscle tension
- Follow a regular, energetic fitness routine using aerobic exercise

\* **Activity**

Stay active. Physical exertion helps reduce anxiety.

\* **Diet**

- No special diet
- Avoid caffeine and other stimulants
- Avoid alcohol

\* **Notify your doctor or talk to a counsellor if**

- You or a family member has symptoms of anxiety and self-treatment has failed
- You develop sudden feelings of panic
- New, unexplained symptoms develop. Drugs used in treatment may produce side effects

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