

Depression

If you are concerned that you may be suffering from depression it may help to be reminded that you are not alone, the World Health Organisation estimates that globally more than 350 million people of all ages suffer from depression. The key thing to bear in mind is that there are effective treatments for depression.

What is depression?

We all experience fluctuations and changes in our mood. Experiencing periods of feeling 'down' is a normal process and sometimes a natural reaction and response to circumstances. The distinction between feeling 'down' and being depressed is linked to both the degree and duration. It also frequently has an impact on being able to engage with different areas of our life as work, studies, relationships, social activities and self-esteem can all be impacted.

Depression includes a persistent low mood and loss of interest or pleasure in life - it also commonly involves:

- a change in eating, weight and/or sleep patterns
- reduced energy levels and reduced physical activity
- impaired concentration
- negative thoughts and beliefs about self, others and the world
- avoiding other people and withdrawing into your room
- feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness
- loss of interest, enthusiasm and enjoyment
- reduced sex drive
- feeling irritable and short-tempered, or tearful
- being unable to continue as usual with work and interests, maybe because you feel apathetic, or 'can't be bothered', or things feel pointless
- the future may seem bleak or hopeless, or you may feel that it is just not worth going on, or think about suicide.

Why do we get depressed?

Sometimes there is a clear trigger for depression, such as adverse life events. At other times there is no clear trigger, it may be that a past event resurfaces and has an impact on the here and now.

How can I help myself?

The question at the forefront of your mind may well be, 'What can I do to help myself?'

Where you ultimately want to see change is in how you feel, so here are some ideas that could move you towards that goal. Firstly, focus some attention on your self-care.

- What is your sleep routine like?
- Are you eating regularly and fairly healthily?
- Are you getting fresh air and exercise at any point in your day and week?

It may also be helpful to think about your day-to-day routine.

Try to notice where you are experiencing a sense of enjoyment and achievement and connection to others, even if it isn't to the extent that you would like it to be, due to the depression.

Depression can lead us to withdraw from and avoid things we previously enjoyed. Try to gently work against this impulse and try to make time and arrange things that open up the possibility of positive emotional experience. Accept that depression is likely to leave you feeling less motivated and less productive, so try to be fair to yourself and acknowledge and celebrate positive changes and achievements.

Depression can leave us feeling battered by an overwhelming volume of negative automatic thoughts which are often very self-critical or judgemental in nature, or based on how we feel at that moment, rather than a more objective reality.

As an initial step, the more you can increase your awareness of these thoughts, which may have become very familiar and habitual, and start to step back from them and challenge them, the easier it will become to establish new thinking patterns. Try to focus on:

- becoming more aware of your negative thoughts
- recognising that your appraisal of situations may be biased or distorted due to depression
- learning how to challenge your own negative thoughts and beliefs so that they become more balanced.

Some examples are given in the table below:

Situation	Negative thoughts	Other explanations
Getting critical feedback for an essay	I am stupid	I didn't have much time to do this essay - the workload has been very heavy recently. I chose to do other things as well. The work is supposed to be challenging. Constructive criticism helps me to improve. I've done OK in the past - which shows I can do well
My partner does not want to see me tonight	They don't care about me any more	They said they had work tonight - this is most likely true. We saw each other at the weekend and had a good time. They've said some nice things to me lately and seemed caring the last time we met.

Do not automatically believe your negative thoughts no matter how powerful they feel at the time – remember, a thought is just a thought, it's not a fact but an opinion.

By considering other explanations, your 'worst possible' conclusion will be seen as only one of a number of possible explanations for your situation. This allows you to consider each explanation and see which is most likely or to collect 'evidence' which will help you test the different explanations. If you feel it is appropriate, try talking to other people to help you get a balanced perspective on which are the most likely explanations.

Seeking further help

It would be advisable to seek help if:

- your low mood and negative thoughts persist or are so strong that you feel powerless to do anything about them
- your low mood is interfering with your life, work or relationships
- you experience feelings of hopelessness or feel suicidal.

Where to seek help

- Talk to your tutor or school/college nurse.
- Talk to your HR department who may have EAP (Employee Assistance Programmes) that may be able to offer some advice/support
- Talk to your GP, who can discuss the range of treatments available to you, including medication.
- If you feel that you need urgent support out of normal working hours, telephone your GP's practice (a message will give you an emergency number) and you will be able to speak with a doctor.
- Telephone the Samaritans
(National) 116 123 or (South West Herts) 01923 233333