

# DEPRESSION

## MYTHS AND FACTS

Depression is an illness that affects your body, feelings, mood, thoughts and behaviour. It affects the way you sleep and eat, the way you feel about yourself and the way you think about things in general. A depressive illness is not the same as a passing blue mood. It is not a sign of personal weakness or a condition that can be willed or wished away. People with a depressive illness cannot 'pull themselves together' and get better.

Any unwelcome life change can trigger a depressive episode such as, a serious loss, chronic illness, childhood trauma, relationship problems, work stress, family issues, and financial problems. The development of depression is often due to a combination of biological, psychological, and environmental factors as well as other psychological problems.

The symptoms of depression vary from person to person and depend on the type and severity of the depression. Depression causes changes in thinking, feeling, behaviour and physical well being. Common symptoms include sadness, withdrawal, inability to concentrate, difficulty making decisions, negative thoughts, crying more, sleeping more, eating more or less, loss of motivation, feelings of guilt, reduced desire for sex, constant exhaustion and suicidal thoughts. Not everyone who is depressed will experience every symptom mentioned.

Some feelings include:-

- The feeling of losing control of your life, a desperate feeling.
- Your life becomes a space filled with darkness, fear, despair and panic.
- Your negative 'thought world' greatly impacts your physical life.
- You feel that either time is racing or moving in slow motion.
- Normal tasks and activities seem insurmountable and life can feel like you are falling into a pit.
- You experience overwhelming feelings of isolation and you disconnect from others.
- You feel trapped with no way to escape.
- You become angry with yourself for feeling like this and as a consequence experience tremendous shame and guilt.
- Depression causes tremendous emotional pain.

**Depression causes changes in your thinking** – You may experience problems with concentration and decision making. Some people have difficulty with short term memory like forgetting things all the time. Negative thoughts like pessimism, poor self-esteem, excessive guilt and self-criticism are all common symptoms.

**Depression causes changes in your feelings** – You may feel sad and cry for no reason at all. Some people report that they do not enjoy activities that they once found pleasurable. You might become more apathetic and lack

motivation. You can feel 'sped up' or 'slowed down'. Depression is sometimes characterised by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

**Depression causes changes in your behaviour** – Because of how you feel you may act more apathetic. Social withdrawal is common as people no longer feel comfortable around other people. You may experience changes in your eating habits either eating more or eating less. Excessive crying is common. Some neglect their personal appearance and basic hygiene and the desire for sex may disappear altogether. Because of all these things it is inevitable that work productivity and household responsibilities will suffer.

**Depression causes changes in your physical well-being** – Despite spending more time sleeping, you may feel exhausted all the time. Others can't sleep or don't sleep soundly. Many, because they lose their appetite, feel slowed down and may complain of many aches and pains that don't seem to have any physical cause.

Imagine feeling this way almost all of the time without respite. Imagine these symptoms lasting for weeks or even months and years. Depression may be present if you experience any or all of these symptoms for at least several weeks. If you consider that you may be depressed please seek help as soon as possible

As there are still many myths surrounding depression, I will try to present some of the more common myths and then the true facts.

**Myth 1 – Depression is not a real medical problem.**

**FACT:** Depression is a real and serious condition. It is no different than diabetes or heart disease in its ability to affect someone's life. Depression can have physical and emotional symptoms which make life very difficult for those who have it.

**Myth 2 – Depression is something that people can 'snap out of' by thinking positively.**

**FACT:** No one chooses to be depressed, why would they, just like no one chooses to have any other medical condition. You don't say to someone who has diabetes "you're choosing to have this diabetes", yet we say to the depressed, "you could be better, it's just that you're choosing to be this way". Why is it that only people with depression are choosing to be that way and no-one else with a medical condition. People with depression cannot just 'snap out of it' even if they chose to anymore than someone with diabetes or heart disease could.

**Myth 3 – The fact that you can't 'snap out of' your depression means that you are weak and feeling sorry for yourself.**

**FACT:** Depression doesn't mean you have a flawed character or aren't strong enough emotionally. Like I said previously, depression cannot be willed away any more than other diseases can. It is **not** a sign of weakness or laziness to be depressed. Given how much stigma is still attached to mental illness, seeking help for depression is an act of courage and strength – not weakness- on your part.

**Myth 4 – Depression is caused by something bad happening in your life, like a relationship breakup, the death of a loved one or failing an exam.**

**FACT:** Depression is more than just having the occasional sad thoughts. Everyone experiences highs and lows in life and many will feel sad for some time after a serious loss or disappointment, but developing depression does not necessarily require a specific negative event, although it can be associated with trauma from past events. Depression can arise suddenly, even when things in life seem to be going well but it would be helpful to do a little digging to ascertain if the depression does have some roots in past traumatic events instead of just assuming it's just a chemical imbalance and nothing else.

**Myth 5 – Depression will just go away on its own over time.**

**FACT:** For the very fortunate, depression may go away by itself. But for others depression can hang on for months, years or indefinitely. Depression that does go away on its own usually returns in the future if the issues associated with it are left undealt with. Once someone has an episode of depression they are predisposed to have more episodes in the future.

**Myth 6 – Talking about depression only makes it worse.**

**FACT:** It is easy to understand why someone might be concerned about discussing their depression with others but being alone with your thoughts can be even more harmful than facing this disorder head on. Talk therapy is extremely beneficial when dealing with the causes of depression but usually best done with a professional who knows how to lead you in the right directions and help you through to the other side of depression. It is essential that you find a supportive, non-judgmental, non-condemnatory professional to discuss your difficulties with. I believe that therapy (counselling) is absolutely necessary along with medication if necessary, as medication alone can just be a bandaid and the real issues causing the depression remain unaddressed. There are some like myself for whom counselling is the only avenue for help with depression as we react badly to all antidepressant medications. Thankfully, for those of us who can't take medication, counselling works very well to reduce the severity of the symptoms without the need for medication.

**Myth 7 – Depression is just a normal part of getting older.**

**FACT:** Although seniors do generally experience more of the events that can trigger depression like loss of family and friends, ill health, isolation and financial worries, it is not a normal part of aging. For those over the age of 60 who grew up in an era in which mental illness was not discussed, they may feel more shame about asking for help than someone from a subsequent generation.

**Myth 8 – Depression only affects people in Western cultures.**

**FACT:** This is not so. Depression does indeed affect other cultures but they belong to a culture where any mention of depression or mental illness as a whole is totally taboo. It does not mean that they are not depressed just that they have to suffer in silence and pretend they do not have it. It doesn't necessarily have to be cultures in other countries, as equally, it can exist in

religious cultures where members are laden with guilt and despair as they struggle to cope in an atmosphere of judgment and condemnation.

**Myth 9 – Depression affects women only.**

**FACT:** Although women report being affected by depression twice as much as men, depression affects men just as much. Men often see depression and asking for help as a sign of weakness and so many go undetected until it's too late.

**Myth 10 – Depression does not exist for children or teenagers, their issues are just a part of growing up.**

**FACT:** It would be nice to believe that all children experience a happy, carefree childhood, but sadly that's simply not the case. Statistics show that 1 in 33 children and 1 in 8 adolescents are depressed in any given year. Because children are not as practiced at articulating their feelings as adults are, it is prudent for adults to take the initiative to look for and notice symptoms of depression in children.

**Myth 11 – You will inherit depression if someone in your family suffered from it in the past.**

**FACT:** Although you can be genetically predisposed to depression just as you can be genetically predisposed to high blood pressure or diabetes, it does NOT mean, however, that if a family member has a history of depression, you are destined to suffer from it as well. It would also depend on what caused the family member to suffer from depression in the first place.

**Myth 12 – Depression is a sign of personal sin, punishment from God or spiritual weakness.**

**FACT:** Depression is NOT a sign of spiritual weakness or hidden sin, nor should it be seen as a punishment from God that we have to passively accept. Even the strongest Christians experience depression. Elijah is well known for his depression and the way that God lovingly and gently attended to his needs without judgment or condemnation. If God, who is the only true healer, has given us the means within our reach to help in our healing, we should be grateful and thank him for blessing us with them and use them, be they medication, counselling or a combination of both (preferably the latter).

Unfortunately it is extremely difficult for Christians to admit they have depression for fear of judgment and condemnation. I have encountered this on many occasions forcing me to hide my depression and suffer alone. The main reasons for this difficulty are I believe:-

- People are afraid others will think they are 'crazy'.
- Lack of understanding about depression and ignorance.
- They are afraid that depression is a weakness or represents a lack of self-discipline.
- They are afraid others will think something is wrong with them or their family.
- They think that they will be chastised for going outside their own family and airing their dirty laundry.
- They are afraid someone will find out and condemn them.

- They have the false belief that good Christians don't get depressed.
- They consider it's a punishment from God, as he tries to shape them into a better person.
- They isolate themselves from going to church until they have pulled themselves together, and as they can't, they stop going to church altogether.
- They are of the belief that if they seek therapy it means that God isn't enough, or they will be told that they don't trust God enough and lack faith.

It is sad, but true, that many in Christian circles do not fully understand the implications or consequences that depression places on someone else's life, and because of that the depressed gets more guilt thrust on them and feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness exacerbate the depression driving it deeper and deeper. Those who try to dissuade religious people from getting the medical help they need for depression, claiming that faith alone is the cure, are doing devastating harm. To seek such treatment does not denote a lack of faith, but rather evidence of a willingness to take advantage of what God has made available to us through modern science. Sometimes what is most needed for the depressed is some good counselling. There are many deeply spiritual people who have found good Christian counsellors to be greatly beneficial, especially if the causes of depression lie in deep-seated and repressed memories of painful and traumatic past experiences.

The most productive way to assist a depressed person, is to help them get appropriate treatment.

The second most important way to help is to offer emotional support. This involves understanding, patience, respect and encouragement. Engage the depressed person in conversation and listen carefully to what they have to say without trying to fix it. **Do not** disparage feelings expressed, but point out realities and offer hope. Encourage the depressed to engage in some activities they once enjoyed but **do not** push the depressed person to undertake too much too soon. They need diversion and company, not too many demands that can increase their feelings of failure.

Finally, to the depressed. Depression can make you feel exhausted, worthless, helpless and hopeless. These negative thoughts and feelings can make you feel like giving up, but I want to encourage you to hang in there as there **will** be light at the end of the tunnel eventually. I too, didn't believe that it was possible but now at the other end the journey was worth all the pain and hard work involved. It will be a difficult journey but you will be a different person at the other end.

In the meantime:

- Do not take on additional responsibility and set difficult goals for yourself.
- Do what you can as and when you can and break up large tasks into smaller more manageable ones and set some priorities.
- Do not expect too much from yourself too soon, as this will only increase your feelings of failure.
- Try not to be alone too much it is better to be with and around other people.

- As hard as it might be, try to force yourself to participate in activities that may make you feel better.
- Try to engage in mild exercise, or going to the movies even if you don't really feel like it.
- Don't get upset if your mood is not greatly improved right away. Feeling better and healing takes time and in God's perfect timing your healing will be complete.
- I would discourage you from making major life decisions, such as changing jobs, moving house etc. without asking someone who has a more objective view of your situation. It is advisable to postpone important decisions until your depression has lifted.
- Seek out help from a professional counsellor. No matter how much you want to beat it yourself, you can't, but a counsellor can help you recover faster.

I want to end with a verse a dear friend sent me in a card when I was at a very low time and it helped more than she will ever know. Although, at the time, I did not believe that the verse applied to me, I now know that it did.

Jeremiah 29:11 *"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

Whenever I would fall back into a depressive episode God would take me back to this verse in order to hang onto it. There is hope and there is a future, I want you to believe that. For those of you who can't yet hang onto this hope and believe it's possible, we can hang onto it for you and believe for you. I slowly began to want to know what his plans for me were and what sort of future he had in store for me. My curiosity kept me hanging onto this hope, although very fragile at times, that things could be different.

As hard as it is, hang onto God with whatever weak fragile thread you have because I know HE never leaves us or forsakes us even though we don't even believe he's there at all. He grieves with us and is waiting for us to be willing to let him take our hands so that he can lift us up again.

*"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you (try to) trust in him."* Rom 15:13 God bless.