

**Depression can increase the risk of suicidal behaviour and suicide.**

## What is depression?

The word 'depression' is often misused to describe the feelings of sadness which all of us experience at some stage in our lives. 'Clinical' depression is also a term used to describe a form of mental illness. One in five people experience clinical depression at some time in their lives.

Clinical depression relates to a set of symptoms which affect a person's ability to carry out the activities of their every day life (Kitchener & Jorm, 2002). Depression involves one or more of the following signs or symptoms, which are present most of the day, nearly every day, for at least two weeks (Mind your Mind).

## Signs and Symptoms

### Behaviours

- Stopped going out.
- Not getting things done at school or work.
- Withdrawn from close family and friends.
- Increase in the use of alcohol or substances to cope.
- No longer doing things they enjoyed.
- Unable to concentrate, remember things easily or make decisions.
- Relying on alcohol and sedatives.

### Thoughts

- Failure - "I'm a failure".
- Guilty - "I'm to blame for everything".
- Pessimism - "What's the use".
- Worthlessness - "I'm worthless".
- "Life is not worth living".
- Thinking negative thoughts about self, others and the world.
- Death and dying.

### Feelings

- Overwhelmed.
- Miserable.
- Frustrated.
- Disappointed.
- No confidence.
- Agitated.
- Indecisive.
- Irritable.
- Guilty.
- Sad.

### Physical

- Tired all the time.
- Churning gut.
- Can't sleep, or oversleeping.
- Change in appetite or eating habits.
- Weight gain or weight loss.
- Loss of energy and motivation.
- Headaches and muscle pains.
- Sick and run down.

(Adapted from Beyondblue, 2004.)

Be alert to these symptoms. If you notice a number of these symptoms, it may be useful to ask the person how long they have been feeling this way. Professional help is needed if a person experiences clinical depression.

# Understanding depression

## What causes depression?

People can become depressed in response to something in particular, and sometimes depression may seem to occur for no apparent reason. Biological, social and physiological factors that can trigger depression include:

### A history of depression within the family

There is a biological vulnerability to depression within families. However, it could also be that learning takes place in families, in relation to negative thinking patterns and poor problem solving or coping skills.

### Life events and life transitions

These can include personal tragedies or disasters. It is also more common at certain stages of life, such as childbirth, menopause and retirement. It is more common in young adults, women and people who abuse substances, especially alcohol and amphetamines. Certain life events can also trigger depression. These are usually ones that affect a person's self esteem and can involve a 'loss' such as the death of someone close, a relationship breakdown and/or unemployment (Black Dog Institute, 2005).

### Chemical imbalance in the brain

Depressive episodes are thought to be due, in part, to a chemical imbalance in the brain. This is caused by the neurotransmitter function being disrupted. Neurotransmitters are chemicals that carry signals from one part of the brain to another. This chemical imbalance can be corrected with anti-depressant medication (Black Dog Institute, 2005).

## Physical illness

Depression is associated with some illnesses, but it often arises in response to the stress of having a physical illness, especially life threatening and chronic disorders, illnesses with distressing symptoms, and conditions associated with high levels of disability (Davies, 2000).

## Personality

People with certain personality characteristics and temperament are more likely to experience depression. Depression occurs more commonly in people who are: anxious, sensitive, emotional and more likely to experience feelings which are upsetting to them, shy and have low self-worth.

Perfectionists who set high standards for themselves and others, and who find it difficult to adjust their ideas and standards to changing circumstances, are more prone to depression. Those who are very dependent on others also have a tendency to become depressed if they are let down.