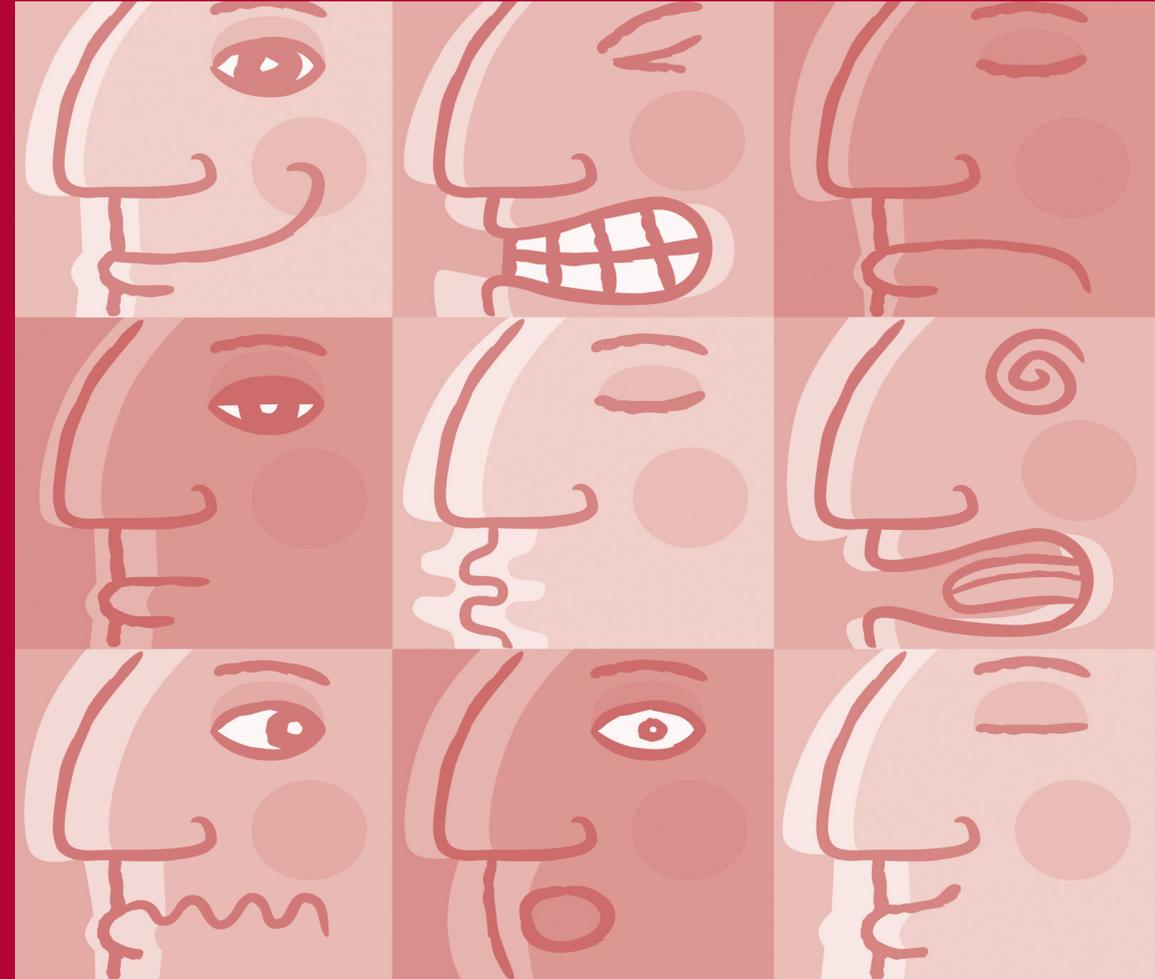


Understanding depression and finding ways to cope



Student Counselling

www.plymouth.ac.uk/counselling

**COUNSELLING
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Depression

Depression is a very common experience. Everyone feels fed up, sad or miserable sometimes. Whereas often the reason for this may be obvious – physical illness, a bereavement or loss, examination stress, worries over study deadlines, a disappointment over a relationship – it may be that we feel blue or moody without really knowing why.

When depression is more severe than we expect, or goes on and on, we may need to seek help. This is particularly true when it starts to affect our studies, our relationships with friends, peers and family or if we begin to think that people may be better off without us.

More than one in six of us will experience depression at least once in our lifetime. It often goes undiagnosed.

Symptoms of Depression

If you have been experiencing a combination of some of the symptoms below over more than a couple of weeks then it would be wise for you to seek professional help:

- loss of interest and enjoyment in life
- finding it hard to concentrate or make decisions
- lack of drive and motivation, making even simple tasks difficult
- loss of energy and fatigue
- not eating properly and losing or gaining weight
- sleeplessness (insomnia) or early waking, or excessive sleeping (hypersomnia)
- physical aches and pains with no physical cause
- increased use of tobacco, alcohol or other drugs
- lack of interest in sex
- irritability or restlessness
- feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- distancing yourself from other people
- feeling numb and empty and taking a bleak pessimistic view of the future
- thoughts of self-harm or suicide – common in depression and a certain sign that help is needed

It is very common for depression to overlap with states of anxiety, stress and panic and there are a number of things you can do to help yourself as well as consulting a counsellor and/or GP.

Helping Yourself

Depression is characterized by negative thinking. It is hard work challenging negative thoughts at the best of times and when you are depressed these can seem so overwhelming that it is a real struggle. But it is not impossible, particularly with other people to help, and can be a most important part of getting 'back on track'. So can establishing a routine which includes constructive and physical activity: things that stimulate you and give you a sense of achievement, however small. You probably won't feel like doing these things but in the doing of them your mood may improve!

Talk to someone. Try telling someone how you feel, whether a friend, counsellor or doctor. You may have had some recent upset in your life which you need to share – to cry over or get angry about. Or you may not know what exactly is troubling you right now: perhaps someone else can help you to puzzle it out.

Be kind to yourself. Try not to blame yourself for things you have said or done or not done, and thereby increase the sense of worthlessness which you may already have. In other words, do not add insult to injury by getting depressed about being depressed!
Remember that you are going through something which many people have suffered and that you will eventually come out of it, even if does not feel like it right now. You will probably emerge stronger and wiser for the experience!

Avoid or reduce stress. Think about managing your time, try to plan ahead so that you spread the load of tasks more evenly. Are you the sort of person who normally says 'yes' to everything? Can you delegate or simply accept that you may need help and that you just cannot do it right now?

Achieving something. If you are not able to work to your normal capacity, try to achieve something in a day however small. Set yourself realistic goals, bearing in mind any tendencies, for example, the morning may be your worst time of day. It may help to list some achievable goals (e.g. going to the library, shopping for your supper, reading one chapter of a textbook) and aim to do at least two. At the end of the day, give yourself credit for the things you have achieved – do not berate yourself for the things you have not done! Take one day at a time.

Diet and exercise. Try to eat a good balanced diet with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, even if you do not feel like it. It will not help to take refuge in alcohol or drugs. Relief afforded by alcohol is only temporary – it actually depresses mood and is only likely to exacerbate your problems. Do get out of doors for a walk or take some other form of exercise. This will help you to keep fit, take your mind off feelings or thoughts which may be going round in your head, and help you to sleep better. Twenty minutes a day of physical activity can help stimulate endorphins – chemicals in the brain which make you feel better.

Relaxation techniques. There are a variety of relaxation techniques and tapes available. Ask for one of our self-help leaflets or CDs on relaxation. If you are not sleeping well try not to lie there worrying about it – get up and do something you find relaxing (reading, listening to radio, television?)

Keep to a regular pattern of waking or sleeping whether you are tired or not, resist the temptation to catch up on a bad night during the day. Milky drinks and relaxation before bedtime might help – coffee, tea or a lot of alcohol will not.

Relating to others. If you are feeling low yourself, it can be hard to relate to others. Unfortunately, what we ‘give out’ is sometimes what we get back from other people. In the long run it doesn’t help if you vent your anger on the wrong person. If you can be agreeable to others (which does not mean having to repress all your feelings!) you are far more likely to get a positive response.

Consulting your GP

If your depression is severe or goes on a long time your GP may prescribe medication to alleviate symptoms such as anxiety or sleeplessness. There are also certain specific forms of depression such as seasonal affective disorder (SAD), postnatal depression or manic depression (bipolar disorder) which a doctor can help diagnose and treat.

Concerns you have about antidepressants and other medication should always be addressed with your doctor. Antidepressants do not normally take effect immediately and you may have to wait a couple of weeks before noticing real results. Remember that medication is not a substitute for talking about your feelings of depression or exploring its possible causes.

Further Reading

Atkinson, S. (1993) *Climbing out of depression*. Oxford: Lion.

Gilbert, P. (2000) *Overcoming depression: a self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques*. London: Constable.

Johnstone, M (2007) *I had a black dog*. London: Robinson.

Rowe, D. (2003) *Depression: The way out of your prison*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.

The Samaritans (1996) *Dealing with depression*. Vermillion.

Williams, C. (2001) *Overcoming depression and low mood: a five areas approach*. London: Hodder Arnold.

Websites

Additional information on depression can also be found at:

www.studentdepression.org

and

www.depressionalliance.org

Further sources of self-help leaflets on a variety of topics can be found on the web at:

www.mind.org.uk/Information/Factsheets

www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinformation.aspx

www.student.counselling.co.uk/guide.html

A useful interactive self-help website is:
www.livinglifetothefull.com

This booklet has been produced by
The University of Plymouth Counselling Service.
For details of our service visit the website:
www.plymouth.ac.uk/counselling

Other Sources of Support

Do remember that if your need for help is urgent and/or you feel suicidal you can:

- contact your GP (including the out-of-hours service) and request an emergency appointment,
- visit the Accident and Emergency Department at your nearest hospital or
- contact the Samaritans.

Samaritans

24hour helpline 08457 909090

www.samaritans.org.uk

NHS Direct

0845 4647

www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

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