



Depression

Around one in six will experience a mental health condition at some point in their lives with the most common disorders being anxiety and depression or a mixture of the two.

Depression is more common in women and incidence increases with age. Symptoms include depressed mood, reduced ability to experience pleasure, irritability, difficulty in concentrating and abnormalities in appetite and sleep.

Depression can be defined as *“an abnormal emotional state characterised by exaggerated feelings of sadness, melancholy, dejection, worthlessness, emptiness and hopelessness that are inappropriate and out of proportion to reality”*.

This condition is not trivial – it is a real illness that you can't just snap out of. It is not the same as having a low mood which may be triggered by stress, anxiety and difficult times and which will pass after a short period of time.

Some people may not even realise that they are suffering from depression but if you are experiencing lasting feelings of unhappiness and hopelessness and lose interest in things that you used to enjoy then depression may be the cause. You may also get physical symptoms such as fatigue, poor sleep, lack of appetite, lack of sex drive and various aches and pains. Severity may range widely from persistently feeling low in spirit to feelings that life is no longer worth living.

There is no single cause of depression. It can occur for a variety of reasons and it has many different triggers. For some people, an upsetting or stressful life event, such as bereavement, divorce, illness, redundancy and job or money worries, could be the cause. If someone in your family has had depression in the past, such as a parent or sibling, it is more likely that you will also develop it.

If you think you may be suffering from depression it is important to get help from your GP. However, with the support of your GP, there is much you can do to care for yourself using a holistic approach that includes dietary and lifestyle approaches. Here are some suggestions:

Mindfulness – Most GPs are aware of the latest research into mindfulness and work by the renowned Oxford Mindfulness Centre has led to major breakthroughs in understanding how mindfulness may help. It is a simple yet profoundly powerful tool when it becomes part of your daily life.

Exercise – One of the best-known natural anti-depressants available. Exercise may help to kick-start more positive feelings and may even help to prevent depression when integrated regularly into your lifestyle. You will get more out of regular exercise if you find something that you really enjoy and that connects you with a friend or social group.



Sleep – Poor sleep patterns are common in depression and can become a vicious cycle as lack of sleep can exacerbate a low mood. Mindfulness and relaxation techniques can be very calming before bedtime, as can a hot bath infused with Epsom salts and lavender essential oil. Avoid using electronic equipment such as computers, phones and tablets during the evening and while in bed as the light emitted from such devices disturb the production of melatonin, a hormone which regulates sleep patterns.

Omega 3s – EPA & DHA are important omega 3 fats often missing from Western diets. Good food sources of omega 3 include mackerel, salmon, walnuts, chia seeds, herring, flaxseeds, sardines, hemp seeds, anchovies and egg yolks. If you take a fish oil supplement it is important that the oil you take has been thoroughly purified to be free from any environmental contaminants such as mercury and PCBs otherwise it may do you more harm than good.

Magnesium – This important mineral is often referred to as a ‘chill pill’ or ‘nature’s tranquiliser’ and is required for maintaining normal muscle and nerve function, keeping a healthy immune system and building strong bones. Magnesium rich foods include dark leafy greens, nuts and seeds, fish, beans and lentils, brown rice, avocados, bananas, dried fruit and dark chocolate.

Vitamins C & D – Both of these nutrients have been found to be a useful natural support for depression. Vitamin C is found in rich supply in brightly coloured fruits and vegetables and vitamin D is produced in the skin in response to sunlight.

Avoid alcohol – Alcohol is a known depressant and best avoided to support improved mood.

Cut out caffeine, sugar & stimulants – these can give an initial high which is followed by a dip in mood and energy levels. Avoid them whilst eating plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables, healthy fats, wholegrains and high quality protein.

Consider joining a support group. It can be helpful to meet people who understand and who can offer help. You may find the following links useful for getting yourself connected with a support group: -

- <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/Depression-help-groups.aspx>
- <http://www.depressionuk.org/groups.shtml>
- www.mind.org.uk

Finally, if you feel in despair please consider contacting the Samaritans. They offer a safe place for you to talk, any time you like, in your own way about whatever is troubling you.

- <http://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help-you/contact-us>