



Age Concern and Help the Aged **Down, but not out factsheet**

What is depression?

Author: Professor Carolyn Chew-Graham

How do I know if I'm depressed?

We all feel sad from time to time; it is part of life's ups and downs. But when the feeling of upset won't go away and you start to lose interest in the things you enjoy, then it may be a sign of depression.

Depression is a physical illness that takes over your mind and body. It can make you feel like everything is hopeless or pointless. You might start thinking poorly of yourself. You might want to distance yourself from those you love. But like most illnesses, there is help available so you don't have to feel this way forever.

Is it normal to feel depressed when you get old?

You can become depressed at any age, but it is common in later life. This is because changes that are more likely to affect us as we get older (such as bereavement or poor health) can trigger it. Between 10% and 20% of people aged 65 and over have symptoms of depression. But depression is not a normal or inevitable part of ageing and it is treatable no matter what age you are.

What causes depression?

You can become depressed for no obvious reason or it can be triggered by a distressing life event, often connected with loss. If you have been depressed in the past, you are more likely to experience it again.

Some common triggers of depression include:

- Major life events (e.g. bereavement, retirement)
- Poor physical health
- Disability
- Loss of independence
- Loneliness
- Feeling isolated
- Lack of social support
- Being a carer
- Money worries
- Poverty
- Poor housing
- Feeling unsafe
- Not feeling needed anymore
- Excessive use of alcohol
- Side-effects of medications

What does depression feel like?

Feeling depressed can resemble the grief and mourning that you would expect following the bereavement of someone you love, but the feelings go on for longer and

are more intense. Being depressed can show itself in many different ways but these are some of the common symptoms.

Symptoms of depression

Emotional symptoms	Sadness Hopelessness Worthlessness Weeping spells Unable to enjoy yourself Feeling anxious all of the time Denial of sadness or mood change
Problems with thinking	Self dislike Self blame Taking things personally Ideas of guilt Indecisiveness Lack of concentration Thoughts of self-harm or suicide
Physical symptoms	Changes in appetite (eating more or less than usual) Weight change Sleep disturbance and waking early Reduced sex drive Headaches Aches and pains Low energy
Behaviour change	Agitation Lack of drive Avoiding people and activities Apathy Dependence on others
Psychotic symptoms	Delusions (e.g. fixed ideas of guilt, sin, poverty, disease) Hallucinations such as hearing voices making negative comments e.g. 'you are a cheat', 'you are a liar' Depressive stupor: becoming very withdrawn and ceasing to communicate or move

Why it is important to recognise and treat depression?

The sooner that depression is recognised, the easier it can be to treat. If you suspect you may be depressed, speak to your GP about it as soon as you can.

If left untreated, depression can lead to:

Lack of energy and motivation
Lack of self care
Increased risk of falls

Risk of malnutrition
Forgetting to take prescribed medication
Thoughts of self-harm and suicide

How does depression affect older people? While depression often affects older people in similar ways to younger people, these are some important differences for you to be aware of.

Physical symptoms and depression: Some of the symptoms of physical illnesses may be similar to those of depression. This may make it more difficult for you and your GP to agree that depression is a problem.

Long-term illness: You are more at risk of becoming depressed if you have an illness such as diabetes, heart disease or arthritis. Treating the depression can improve the physical condition and make the pain more bearable.

Confusion and memory problems: Worry and agitation can interfere with memory and make you feel and appear quite confused. In turn, you may worry that you are becoming 'senile' or developing dementia such as Alzheimer's disease. However, depressed people are usually quite aware of not being able to remember things whereas people with dementia may not realise there is a problem. It is important not to put off seeking help because you are worried about this. Once your depression starts to lift, your memory should improve.

A new sense of loneliness: Living alone does not automatically make you depressed. After all, you can be alone but not lonely. However, if you are finding it hard to leave the house or socialise, you may develop a sense of loneliness that was not there before or wasn't as bad.

How do doctors diagnose depression?

Your doctor will need to ask you questions to find out if you have symptoms of depression. Some common questions they would ask you are:

- Have you been feeling sad or down? If so, for how long?
- Do you still enjoy doing things?
- Do you have trouble concentrating?
- Do you have any problems with your sleep?
- What are your energy levels like?
- What is your appetite like?
- How do you feel about yourself?
- Do you feel you're moving more slowly or quickly than usual?
- Do you feel uptight or fidgety?

GPs and practice nurses may also ask the following questions:

- During the past month, have you often been bothered by feeling down, depressed or hopeless?
- During the past month, have you often been bothered by having little interest or pleasure in doing things?

They may use a questionnaire to check out problems and feelings. Sometimes they might also assess your potential risk of suicide too. Doing this **will not** lead you to think about suicide, rather you will likely feel relieved that the issue has been raised and you can talk about it.

Why is it hard to diagnose depression?

It can be hard to diagnose depression because the symptoms can often be physical like aches and pains. But sometimes the first sign of depression can be a constant

worry about having a physical illness, even when the doctor cannot find anything wrong. So as well mentioning your physical complaints to your GP don't be afraid to tell them how you feel as well, particularly if your mood is low.

When should I seek help?

You should ask for help if your feelings of depression:

- Have gone on for several weeks
- Interfere with your life
- Mean that you cannot face being with other people
- Make you feel that life is not worth living
- Are noticed by other people (family members or friends)

How should I seek help?

Speak to your doctor or nurse. GPs are quite used to helping people with depression and have had training in how to deal with it. You are certainly not wasting your doctor's time by asking for advice or help. If you find it difficult to leave the house, ask if your doctor or practice nurse will visit you at home. It may be helpful to have a friend or relative with you when they do.

If your depression is mild, you and your doctor may agree to keep an eye on it to see how it progresses. Often it will improve, particularly if your other problems are improving. There may also be things that you can do to help yourself.

If your depression is more severe, persistent or recurrent your doctor may suggest medication or talking treatments. Occasionally your doctor may suggest referral to a psychiatrist or community mental health team.

How can relatives and friends help?

If you think that a friend or relative is becoming depressed, encourage them to accept help. You may be the first person to notice the depression. The first port of call should be their GP, who will be able to talk with them and offer treatment.

Your friend or relative will need to hear that depression is quite common and that it can get better. It may often be enough to show your concern by just being there with them. Thoughts of self-harm or suicide are a clear sign that urgent help is needed. Most people who feel like this are relieved when someone asks about it.

Other sources of help

Age Concern and Help the Aged

Free National Information Line: 0800 00 99 66

Many local Age Concerns provide, or can direct you to, a range of support services such as:

- Information and advice
- Day centres and lunch clubs
- Befriending schemes
- Bereavement counselling, depression support, person-centred therapy

- Transport to activities
- Exercise programmes
- A free benefits check
- Insurance services
- Dementia care

For more information, or to find your nearest Age Concern, please contact our free National Information Line on 0800 00 99 66.

More information about our depression campaign 'Down, but not out' and our free resources and factsheets can be found on our website:

www.ageconcern.org.uk/downbutnotout

Other factsheets in the series include:

The causes and effects of depression in later life by Professor Klaus Ebmeier and Dr Philip Wilkinson
Medication for depression in later life by Dr Robert Baldwin
Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) by Dr Philip Wilkinson
Counselling and psychotherapy by Judith Brech
Interpersonal therapy by Dr Rebecca Mather
Self help for beating depression and staying well by Philippa Cuttall & Lisa Bracher
Thoughts of self harm and suicide by Dr Dan Harwood

Depression Alliance

Provides information and support services to those affected by depression

Telephone: 0845 123 23 20

Email: information@depressionalliance.org

Website: www.depressionalliance.org

Mind

Provides information and advice on depression and campaigns to promote and protect good mental health for everyone.

Telephone: 020 8519 2122

Email: contact@mind.org.uk

Website: www.mind.org.uk

Mind Cymru

Telephone: 02920 395 123

Email: contactwales@mind.org.uk

Website: <http://www.mind.org.uk/>

Alzheimer's Society

Gives support to families by linking them through membership and provides information on Alzheimer's disease and other dementias.

Telephone: 020 7423 3500

Email: info@alzheimers.org.uk

Website: alzheimers.org.uk

Aware (Ireland)

Assists and supports those suffering from depression and their families in Ireland. A helpline is available as well as support groups, lectures, and current research on depression.

Telephone: 1890 303 302

Email: wecanhelp@aware.ie

Website: www.aware.ie

Samaritans

Provide a confidential 24 hours a day helpline for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including those which could lead to suicide.

Telephone: 1850 60 90 90 (24 hours)

Website: www.samaritans.org

Email: jo@samaritans.org

CRUSE - Bereavement Care

Offers a service of counselling, advice and opportunities for social contact to all bereaved people.

Telephone: 0870 167 1677

Email: helpline@crusebereavementcare.org.uk

Website: www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

Can help you to find a therapist in your area

Telephone: 01455 883 316

Email: bacp@bacp.co.uk

Website: www.bacp.co.uk

Depression UK

A national mutual support group for people suffering from depression

Email: info@depressionuk.org

Website: www.depressionuk.org

Healthtalk Online

People's accounts of their illnesses and treatment, including older people with depression in the Mental Health Section

Website: www.healthtalkonline.org/

Royal College of Psychiatrists

Provides free mental health information and leaflets.

Telephone: 020 7235 2351

Email: leaflets@rcpsych.ac.uk

Website: www.rcpsych.ac.uk

Recommended Reading

Depression and how to survive it, by S. Milligan and A. Clare

Malignant sadness: the anatomy of depression, by L. Wolpert

Managing depression by David Westbrook