

## Understanding and Managing Depression

It is a normal experience to feel down, sad and low at times, particularly when something bad or unpleasant has happened to us or those we care about. Usually these feelings resolve and fade away as other good things occur in our lives and time passes. However for some of us these feelings of sadness and low mood can be experienced in a severe form and can be maintained for longer periods of time.

This type of more severe and long standing sadness and low mood is often referred to as depression. Depression is a clinical term that refers to a condition where severe and long-term sadness and low mood occur and is also accompanied by other symptoms such as weight loss or weight gain, difficulty sleeping or excessive sleeping, loss of interest in pleasurable and fun activities, poor attention, concentration and memory, irritability and restlessness and/ or re-occurring negative thoughts about yourself, your current situation and your future.

Depression is a clinical condition, that is, it is a serious condition which does not resolve overnight but rather takes time to fix and requires specialised treatments. It is important to understand this and allow yourself time to recover and participate in appropriate treatment.

### Treatments for Depression

There are two major forms of treatment for depression which can be used individually or in combination. The following section provides information about treatment regimes.

#### ➤ **Antidepressant Medications**

One defining aspect of depression is a change in the balance of chemicals in the brain which impact on our mood. When we do not have enough of some specific chemicals in our brain this can contribute to feeling low, sad and fatigued. Antidepressant medications are drugs which assist in restoring the chemical balance in the brain to alleviate biological symptoms of depression. Unfortunately antidepressants do not directly assist in changing thoughts and behaviours which also contribute to depression which is where psychological treatments can be very beneficial.

#### ➤ **Psychological Treatments**

It is widely known that problems with thinking and behaviour are present in most depressed individuals. Psychological treatments for depression not only provide a supportive environment for us to share our difficulties but also aim to assist in providing skills and strategies to change thinking patterns and behaviours which contribute to depression. There are names given to some of the proven types of psychological treatments such as cognitive therapy, cognitive behaviour therapy and interpersonal therapy. Your APS psychologist is highly skilled in treating depression and can explain their approach and how it assists in treating depression.

### ➤ **Combination Treatments**

Research has shown that often a combination of both antidepressant medication and psychological treatment can provide optimal benefits to individuals with depression. The antidepressant medication assists in changing the individual's mood state from negative to normal whilst the psychological treatment provides support and skills and strategies to change maladaptive thinking and behaviour and increase long-term coping skills to minimise future relapse.

## **Things You Can Do In Managing Depression** **Problem Areas and Solutions**

### **Loss of Interest In Pleasurable and Fun Activities**

**Problem:** People who experience depression often find themselves not enjoying activities they previously enjoyed. Not only do they miss out on positive experiences by not participating in enjoyable activities but people they are around who are associated with such activities may also suffer.

**Solutions:** The following points provide some general guidelines for increasing the amount of pleasurable activity you experience.

- Make a list of activities you find (or used to find) enjoyable. Make sure you write down as many activities as you can. Remember to list both very enjoyable activities and also those activities which are only marginally enjoyable.
- Plan schedules of activities each day to include enjoyable activities. Try to increase the amount of time each day available for positive activities.
- After an activity really think about the aspects of it which were enjoyable. Talk to others about activities they enjoy and reflect on positive experiences.
- Remember that during a depressive episode things may not seem as enjoyable as they were previously. Focus on the positive no matter how small and remember that as you recover the level of enjoyment you will receive will only increase.

### **Changes in Sleeping Patterns**

**Problem:** Changes in sleeping patterns (both excessive sleeping and insomnia) are also common in individuals experiencing a depressive episode. Inappropriate sleeping patterns can exacerbate difficulties with mood and make routine interpersonal communication and daily activities seem excessively difficult and frustrating.

**Solutions:** Regular, healthy sleeping patterns are a critical part of recovery from depression. Listed below are a few key points to assist you in establishing healthy sleeping patterns.

- Make sure you get up at roughly the same time every morning regardless of how tired you feel.
- Avoid sleeping during the day or taking naps in the early evening before bed time.
- Reduce tea and coffee intake to a maximum of 4 cups per day and do not have any tea or coffee after 3 or 4 pm.
- When you are awake at night do not lie in bed trying to sleep for more than 30 minutes at a time. Get up and go to another room and engage in a relaxing activity such as reading, listening to music, or a relaxation exercise (see your APS Psychologist for more information) until you feel sleepy – then return to bed and sleep.

### ***Worrying and Negative Thinking***

**Problem:** Worrying – or excessive rumination on possible future negative events and negative thinking about yourself, your world and the your future are frequently occurring types of negative thinking patterns people with depression experience. Worrying and negative thinking are unhealthy in that they reduce a person's ability to focus on recovery and facilitate the experience of unhealthy emotions and behaviour.

**Solutions:** Changing negative thinking patterns and reducing worry is not as easy as it may seem. This is an area that people often require the assistance of a Psychologist in addressing. Below are some helpful suggestions to get you started in learning to control worry and reduce negative thinking.

- When worrying about a problem find a piece of paper and write down exactly what the problem is. If there is more than one problem write down each one individually. Once you have written each problem down then systematically go through a problem solving exercise to address each one and examine all the possible outcomes (both positive and negative) and their likelihood. See your APS Psychologist for more information and training in the use of problem solving strategies.
- When dealing with negative thinking patterns take time to think about how realistic negative thoughts are. Try to explore alternate thoughts and explanations for circumstances. Keep a record of thoughts and possible alternate more helpful ways of thinking.
- Avoid excessively discussing negative thoughts and feelings. When discussing things with colleagues, family or friends try to focus on positive aspects of situations. Negative thinking and dwelling on negative topics will not help you feel good.
- Keep yourself busy and your mind focused on tasks. Avoid unstructured time where your mind may wander and dwell on negative themes.
- Try to think positively. There are many things you can do to address the cognitive component of depression. Some of these include: make a list of your skills, talents, and achievements; try to identify the three most beautiful things in your environment; reminisce about a time when you were really happy, successful, or content.
- Keep a journal of your thoughts, identify negative and unhelpful thoughts, and try to correct them (see below).
- Do not make any major life decisions, such as quitting your job or getting married or separated while depressed. Remember, you may not be seeing yourself, the world, or the future in an objective way when you are depressed.

### ***Irritability, Agitation and Fatigue***

**Problem:** Irritability, agitation and fatigue are common experiences among people with depression. Sometimes people feel frustrated with their rate of recovery or the level of support available and annoyed that they don't feel like they have the energy to do anything any more. Sometimes people find themselves getting more easily upset with those around them. Irritability, agitation and fatigue are often compounded by changes in sleeping patterns and other symptoms associated with depression such as negative thinking.

**Solutions:** Being irritable or agitated is a normal part of depression and it is important that others around us who provide support are aware of this so that they can be more patient and understanding rather than annoyed and un-supportive. Below are some tips to help you deal with feelings of irritability and agitation.

- Make sure you take the time to educate and advise key support people (such as close friends, family and colleagues) of what you are going through and that if you appear somewhat irritable or agitated it is not because you are unhappy with them but rather because you are currently recovering from depression. Also take the time to thank them for their support and provide any further feedback on how they can best continue support you.
- When you are feeling irritable or agitated stop and settle yourself down. Ask yourself what is driving your emotions. If it is negative thinking then use strategies outlined previously to tackle negative thoughts. If you are tired – pace out your workload to allow for this. If you feel unmotivated – try and incorporate some enjoyable activities into your schedule.
- Practice regular relaxation activities and organise regular times to talk with a support person such as a Psychologist about how you are coping and implementing new coping skills. By taking time out to relax regularly and communicate with supportive people you greatly reduce the impact of potentially irritating and frustrating experiences.
- Be as active as possible despite fatigue. Try to schedule activities to fill up the spare hours of the day. Activities may include exercise, social interaction, or even routine household chores. If activity seems impossible, try to force yourself to do three things each day - it could be getting out of bed, getting changed out of your pyjamas, and brushing your hair. Even the smallest amount of activity is better than no activity at all.