

Depression

What is Depression?

Depression has been called the “common cold of mental health”. It’s not the result of laziness, weakness, personal failure or lack of power. Depression is a prolonged and persistent negative mood that can colour and interfere with many aspects of your life.

It’s not uncommon

Feeling ‘blue’, sad, hopeless and pessimistic is something we all experience at times. We can all feel pressured to a point where nothing seems to give us pleasure and it becomes hard to get interested in things or to even get started. These feelings are a normal part of being human.

At times however, these feelings can become overwhelming, intense and ongoing to such an extent that daily functioning seems difficult or impossible. When this happens you may be experiencing clinical depression.

What can cause it?

Depression is typically caused by a combination of environmental, biological, genetic and psychological factors.

Environmental factors

Examples include difficulty adjusting to uni life, a bad living situation, academic difficulties, financial problems, loss of something significant (a job, goals) or being victimized (robbery, assault).

Interpersonal factors

Examples include relationship problems or breakdowns, family conflicts or the loss of a loved one.

Physical/Medical factors

Examples include food allergies, unhealthy diets, genetic predispositions, chemical imbalances, illness, sleep deprivation or chronic anxiety.

Diet/Exercise factors

Examples include fast foods, sugar, caffeine, alcohol, substance abuse or lack of exercise.

Thoughts/Perceptions factors

Examples include negative self talk, pessimistic thinking or a low sense of self worth.

Spiritual/Philosophical factors

Examples include doubts about the meaning of life, questions about your own religious beliefs or your true calling in life, or a questioning of your dreams and beliefs.

How do I know if I’m depressed?

As a university student, you may find that you’re prone to depression from time to time, coping with the multiple stressors of school, work, friends and family. This is normal. Clinical depression however, usually involves the following combination of symptoms, persisting for more than a 2 week period.

Emotional symptoms

Sadness, anxiety, guilt, anger, mood swings, helplessness/hopelessness.

Physical symptoms

Sleeping too much or too little, excessive weight loss or gain, loss of sexual desire or lethargy.

Behavioural symptoms

Crying for no apparent reason, withdrawal from others, irritability, lack of motivation to set or meet goals, lack of interest in physical appearance or in former activities, turning to drugs or alcohol for support.

Thoughts/perceptions

Feelings of failure, self-criticism, pessimism about the future, self-blame or hopelessness.

OK, so I'm depressed. What do I do about it?

Some general strategies may assist with managing depression. These include:

1. Developing and using the support systems available to you. For example, talking to a friend or family member about how you're feeling.
2. Giving yourself a break from stressful situations/events if possible.
3. Learning to use progressive relaxation or meditation techniques.
4. Developing a healthy balanced diet.
5. Getting regular exercise and sleep.
6. Developing stress and time management skills.
7. Checking in with your emotions – learn to be aware of them and express your feelings appropriately. Don't expect perfection of yourself or others!
8. Attempting to involve yourself with activities that were formerly pleasurable.
9. Clarifying and prioritizing your values and goals.

Seeking professional support from a General Practitioner (GP) or a Psychologist when:

- The emotional pain outweighs the pleasure most of the time.
- Your symptoms are so severe and persistent that your daily functioning is impaired.
- The stress seems so overwhelming that suicide seems to be a viable option.

Treatment options

Counselling

Talking with a Psychologist, such as ECU's Student Psychologists (available on all campuses), can help you develop skills for solving problems, planning ahead and improving interactions with others, and can help you see the positive side of yourself, others and your circumstances.

Medical treatment

A GP can help treat the medical side of the depression, such as chemical imbalances or sleep difficulties, and may discuss the possibility of using an antidepressant medication, if appropriate. Your GP can also refer you to specialists, such as Psychologists or Psychiatrists, who can help you manage your particular symptoms.

A combination of medication and counselling is often the most effective way to treat severe, ongoing depression.

How can you help a person who is depressed?

A concerned friend or family member can provide a valuable service to a person who is depressed. Sometimes it's helpful just to listen to the person who is depressed while they get things off their chest, but remember...

- You don't have to solve their problems, but rather assist to find different ways of seeing things. Be supportive and patient, even though you may feel angry or frustrated with the person.
- Don't claim that you feel the same way. In many cases you may not, and this could make the depressed person more upset.
- Explain your concern for the person and encourage them to use some of the techniques described above to help themselves, particularly the use of the Counselling or Medical Services on campus if their depression is intense or ongoing.

The good news to remember is that depression is treatable!

More reading

- **ReachOut: Depression fact sheet**
reachout.com.au
- **The National Depression Initiative**
BeyondBlue.org.au
- **Australia's National Youth Mental Health Foundation**
Headspace.org.au

Scan to access
additional tip
sheets



Want to chat to someone?

For a confidential – and free – chat about your general situation, please contact our ECU Psychologist, or the Psychological Counselling Support Team service to make an appointment at any of our campuses.

Alternatively, you can discuss study techniques and tips with a Learning Adviser in our Academic Skills Centre.