

Depression: What does it look like?

What is depression?

While it's totally normal to feel sad and down at different times, depression is when these sad feelings last for an extended period of time and often for no reason at all. Depression is more than just feeling low, it is a serious condition that affects physical and mental health and makes it difficult for people to cope with everyday life.

The good news is that there are many effective treatments available for depression, and that most people respond to these treatments really well.

What causes depression?

Depression can be caused by a range of factors, including:

- A family genetic predisposition
- Certain personality types (e.g. having the tendency to worry, be perfectionistic, sensitive to criticism or low self-esteem)
- Long-term difficulties (e.g. unemployment, unhappy or abusive relationships, prolonged work stress)
- Traumatic or stressful events (e.g. bereavement, loss of job, divorce)
- Illness or chronic pain
- Drug or alcohol use
- During pregnancy or in the post-natal period

Signs of depression

People with depression experience persistent feelings of sadness, often for no apparent reason, for a period that lasts at least two weeks.

Depression affects people differently and symptoms can range from mild to severe. Someone with depression might have any combination of the following symptoms:

- Depressed mood most of the day – characterised by feelings of sadness, hopelessness, emptiness, worthlessness or guilt.
- Diminished interest or pleasure in all or almost all activities.
- Feeling extremely sad or tearful.
- Changes in eating habits (loss of interest in food or eating too much), often contributing to significant weight loss or gain.
- Having difficulties sleeping or sleeping too much.
- Loss of sexual interest.
- Increase in drinking or using drugs.
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions.
- Lack of energy and tiredness.
- Moving more slowly or becoming more agitated and unable to settle.
- Recurrent thoughts of death, or wishing to be dead.

Seeking help

If you or someone you know is experiencing symptoms of depression, it's important to seek treatment early.

Most people recover from depression, but the right treatment is different for everybody. It's important to see a health professional, to work out which treatment option is best. Generally, there are three main treatment types: psychological, medical and complementary therapies.

Psychological treatments focus on thinking patterns, behaviour and coping styles to better help people to deal with life stressors. One example is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which works to adjust unhelpful thoughts and behaviour to a more positive and problem-solving focus.

The main medical treatment for depression is anti-depressant medication. These are usually prescribed by a GP in conjunction with psychological treatment. There are a lot of common misconceptions about antidepressants, so it's important to talk to a GP to make sure you have the correct information.

Complementary therapies are alternative methods which may help to reduce depressive symptoms, such as:

- maintaining a healthy lifestyle
- relaxation training or mindfulness
- joining support groups
- connecting with family and friends