

CRAMOND MEDICAL PRACTICE



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DEPRESSION

AND HOW TO WORK WITH IT

ABOUT DEPRESSION

Basic Information:

Depression is common. It is a real problem. It can have a major effect on your work, home and family life, and your outlook about yourself and the world. In most cases, it has nothing to do with mental illness.

Somewhere around 20 - 25% (about 1 person in 4 or 5) are treated for depression at some time or other in their life. The average age of onset is usually between 40 and 50, though any age is possible. It is more common in women than in men. It is more common in lower socio-economic classes and more disadvantaged people.

People usually get well reasonably quickly after depression has been diagnosed and treated, though periods of depression can reoccur. Treatment tends to take a few months, rather than weeks, though some benefits can be experienced reasonably quickly.

It is harder to treat if it has been neglected. Depression is only very occasionally severe enough to be considered as an illness (in about 3-4% of those depressed).

Depression is much more of a 'state of being' or a mood disorder. There are many different causes or ways in which someone can become depressed.

Symptoms of Depression:

The symptoms of depression tend to fall into four main groupings: Emotions or Feelings; Physical Symptoms; Thought Patterns; and Behavioural Symptoms.

- **Emotions:** Include feelings like crying a lot; feeling alone (even in company); feeling sad, depressed upset, hopeless, despairing, or just numb; feeling anxious, irritable or unreasonably angry; feeling lethargic; having no interest or enjoyment in things (even things that used to be enjoyable); low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness and/or guilt.
- **Physical Symptoms:** Loss of energy, lethargy, tiredness or fatigue; restlessness or agitation; changes in appetite (either poor or increased) and resulting weight loss or gain; difficulties in sleeping, either not falling asleep easily, not returning to sleep after mid-night waking, or early morning wakening; or a desire to sleep a great deal of the time; can have headaches, indigestion, stomach pains, and/or irregular periods.
- **Thoughts:** Difficulty in concentrating and/or a slowness in thinking; indecisiveness; loss of confidence in self; having an unusually negative or gloomy outlook; thinking that everything is hopeless or that the worst will happen; negative self-concept, self-reproach and self-blame, even self-hate; recurrent thoughts of death or suicide.
- **Behaviour:** Having difficulty in doing anything; neglecting everyday tasks, regular meals and personal hygiene; putting off doing things, even things that one normally enjoys; having short occasional bursts of energy and then usually not completing things; cutting oneself off from friends, family, regular support or social activities; difficulty in maintaining regular work hours.

Sources of Depression:

Often a series of overwhelming life events, coming one after the other, can result in a depressive reaction; or it can come from a build-up of general life stresses. This is called 'exogenous' or 're-active' depression. There is essentially nothing wrong with you, but a series of 'wrong' things have happened to you, or around you. These things might include the death of someone close, an accident, stresses or changes at work, the break-up of a marriage or relationship, a trauma or serious incident, illness of a close friend or relative, or a series of major and minor events that all accumulate together to stress you out. Some people react against such stresses and become anxious; others become depressed.

In other people, depression can occur after a particular illness (flu or viral infection), or after a pregnancy (Post-Natal Depression), or with the menopause, or as a side effect of other medications, or from a vitamin deficiency - all of which indicate a more internal origin (endogenous).

Some people are more somewhat genetically disposed towards having a depression. For others, it can also be an aspect of their character that they have developed, or they have been influenced by the way they were brought up, or by the people who brought them up.

Treatment:

The usual treatment, a combination of self-help (exercise, relaxation & information) at first, with possibly some counselling or psychotherapy, and then medication (in more severe cases), is what is recommended. This is reasonably successful - nearly all patients really do get better quite quickly from the time of starting treatment. The quicker someone gets diagnosed and treated, the easier it is to treat them, and they tend to get better faster.

Self-help techniques (exercise, relaxation & information) are the most effective means and should be tried first (more about this later). The official guidelines recommend counselling, often Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), as the next level of intervention: then possibly some antidepressant medication in the more severe or persistent cases.

Medication is now the third option for treatment. There are three or four main types of antidepressant medication: tranquillisers (for agitation); SSRIs (now the most frequently used: Prozac, etc) that help boost serotonin levels; tri-cyclic antidepressants (mostly for endogenous depression); and various other medications.

If antidepressant medication does become part of your treatment plan, then it is important to take it exactly as prescribed. Medication is not a miracle cure, nor is it an effective replacement for self-help or counselling or therapy. What medication can do is to relieve the symptoms of depression and create an inner stability that will allow you to make proper use of other resources.

Foods for Depression:

Food influences our brain chemistry. Some foods promote a feeling of well-being, others can suppress positive emotions. Ironically, many foods that make us feel good are not especially beneficial to our health. Therefore we need to find a healthy dietary balance.

Nerve impulses in the brain are carried by neurotransmitters. One of these needed is Serotonin and the SSRI-type of antidepressants, like Prozac, inhibit the re-uptake of serotonin, allowing it to remain available and thus produce a feeling of well-being. Vitamin B6 is involved with the synthesis of serotonin and can be found in certain whole grains (millet, buckwheat, oats) as well as shellfish (prawns, shrimp, lobster & mussels). Ensure you have enough B6 to make the serotonin you need.

However, we often crave carbohydrates and sweet foods in depression, and these also affect brain chemicals – though in the short term only (“Quick Fix” “Sugar High”). So it is much better to avoid these (and avoid putting on weight) and aim for longer-term effects. Good blood sugar management is important in fighting depression. Try taking in complex sugars from proteins, and a little of the more natural sugars, fructose and glucose, rather than from processed foods with lots of added sugar (corn syrup). Check the labels.

Protein sources of complex sugars are nuts, legumes, beans, tofu, eggs, fish and poultry. You can eat these with a little carbohydrate, which also contains sugar, but this latter is processed more quickly. Increase the protein to carbohydrate ratio, and you will eat less anyway as your appetite is controlled by the amount of protein you eat.

Low levels of another brain chemical Dopamine are also linked with depression. This brain chemical is created from tyrosine, an amino acid found in protein type foods. It requires the vitamins B12 and B9 (folic acid) as well as the mineral magnesium for its production. Foods rich in tyrosine include almonds, avocados, bananas, cottage cheese, lima beans, peanuts (raw, unsalted), pumpkin seeds and sesame seeds. Foods high in B12 include dairy and fish products. Foods high in B9 (folic acid) include calves, liver, soya flour, green leafy vegetables (broccoli), eggs and brown rice. Magnesium can be found in sunflower seeds, green leafy vegetables, wheatgerm, soya beans, mackerel, swordfish and cod.

Vitamin B3 has also been found particularly useful in managing depression and this vitamin is found in fish, eggs, brewer’s yeast, wholegrains and poultry. There is also a link with low zinc levels, often in post-partum situations. Zinc is found oysters, endives, alfalfa sprouts, seaweed, brown rice, asparagus, mushrooms, turkey and radishes.

SELF-HELP FOR DEPRESSION

Here are some simple self-help techniques for depression. Remember that “Self-Help” is the first essential step of any effective treatment plan. You might find some of these useful.

Hope: The most important ingredient towards getting better is hope. This comes from the knowledge that most people do get better reasonably quickly; and from the trust that the most important factor in getting better is your own attitude towards your recovery. Being ‘positive’ really helps recovery.

Exercise: Any activity that promotes endurance, flexibility or strengthening is a natural antidepressant. Exercise, and in particular aerobic exercise, improves circulation, brings increased blood flow and oxygen to the brain, releases endorphins (the body's natural pain-killing & feel-good chemicals) and boosts serotonin. Unfortunately the most challenging aspect of depression is a general lack of motivation and low energy levels. The overwhelming sense of physical inertia can make it very difficult to do even the most simple of tasks, much less get out and do some regular exercise. So you may need some initial help and persuasion. Aerobic exercise is becoming a much more recognized form of therapy. It is widely acknowledged that if you can discipline yourself to do some form of exercise regularly; you will almost definitely feel better for it. Even a brisk walk once a day is a very good start. Get a friend or family to help you with your motivation. Build up to doing 30-45 minutes of aerobic exercise 3-4 times a week, if you can.

Diet: Good nutrition supports the optimal functioning of your body and brain. Try to eat a balanced diet of healthy foods. Eating as much organic produce as possible will help to minimize the intake of chemicals and preservatives, which can cause problems in sensitive individuals. Another part of nutritional self-care is cutting back on sugar, salt, and alcohol. Studies have shown that too much sugar (in any form) can foster anxiety as well as depression. Alcohol can also have a negative effect. Drink plenty of water. Eat the more complex carbohydrates. Do not eat too many comfort foods or ready-prepared and processed foods. Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables: eat little and often: have bowls of fruit and nuts to hand. “Smoothies” are also good for you, and quite fun to make.

Sleep: Try to develop a good sleep schedule - a regular time of going to sleep and arising - and stick to it. Sleep irregularities are among the early warning signs of anxiety and depression. A good night's sleep can really help towards curing depression. Prepare yourself: don't eat too late; take some very gentle exercise before you go to bed; have a bath; read a book for a little when in bed.

Be Prepared: Make a list of things you really must do each day and tick them off as you go - this gives you a sense of achievement. If you think of something pleasant and self-indulgent that you would rather do than one of your chores, then do it and enjoy it. Then do the chore. Do both.

Breathe: One of the most powerful ways to impact your emotions and the involuntary nervous system is through your breathing. If you are stressed or startled or angry, stop, close your eyes and focus your breathing. Inhale slowly & gently through your nose, directing the air deep into your chest and then into your belly. Then exhale slowly and forcefully through your partially opened mouth. Repeat this in-breath and out-breath cycle 5-10 times and you will see how this simple technique really works to relax you. Learn to start breathing – properly.

Laugh: Even when you are just make laughing expressions, your body produces chemicals that make you feel happier. Watch films or TV programs that are funny. Listen to jokes or read books that you enjoy. Meet up with friends who make you laugh.

Prayer / Meditation: If you believe that prayer can have an effect, take some regular time to pray, both by yourself and/or with other people. Meditation involves stilling the mind so that we can hear the "still small voice" of God within, or our inner wisdom, and be open to this type of guidance. These are both also very relaxing and a great aid, especially towards reducing anxiety.

Keep a Journal: Writing in a diary or journal is one of the best self-help methods you can use. Put down new sights and smells, new experiences of any kind. Note down things that you have done during the day and how you felt doing them. Especially write about your feelings. Write every day, if possible. It may help to write at the same time every day, maybe after dinner or before you get ready for bed. Write for yourself only. Try not to censure it. Don't worry about the spelling or punctuation. You are the only person who should ever read it.

Natural World: Spend some time in nature. Whether it's watching a moonrise over a mountain peak, a sunset over the ocean, or simply taking a leisurely walk in your city park, or by a river, spending time in nature imparts its healing touch. If you have a garden, there's always something to do in it, or just to enjoy it. Even in a flat: re-potting some houseplants; pottering with some bulbs or a window box helps marvellously. Maybe a friend needs a bit of help with their plants or garden, so that you can enjoy their company as well.

Creativity: Indulge in some right-brain creative activity. Try to allow yourself to become lost in something creative or constructive. Creative activity can be anything such as cooking, dancing, gardening, riding, dancing, poetry, writing, jigsaws, and any form of artwork, etc. It is the 'doing' of these that is important - not how well you do them.

Do Not Judge - yourself or others, but particularly yourself. Negative judgements and criticisms debilitate, rather than give any good feelings or help your situation. This is just **not** what you want. Don't go there: keep coming away from that place of blame! Try to replace negative thought forms with more positive ones.

Correct Your Thinking: Many people in depression have negative thought patterns. They are not really 'your' thoughts, but are more a symptom of the depression: like spots are a symptom of measles. CBT is a form of therapy that works with such thoughts, but there is a lot you can do yourself to 'correct' these depressive and negative thoughts. Your friends and family should be aware of some of them; start with these. There are also self-help books that can help here.

Get Good Information: These handouts are only one part of the information that you might need. Check out the local Library; go on the Internet; pick up some leaflets at the health centre; go to a good bookshop; talk to your friends; or whatever. If all these are telling you pretty much the same things, then you have all the basic information you need. There may be a few bits and pieces that you are not sure of, and want to check out further, but don't let that stop you doing all or any of the above in the interim. 'Biblio-therapy' is becoming a new form of treatment.

Being in the Now: Try to enjoy each moment as best you can. Focus your thoughts on what is happening right now. Do not dwell on what is past or on 'if only'; or what has happened or has not happened. What has happened, the past, cannot be changed. We can learn from this, perhaps, but do not worry about it or obsessively think about it. It is past. The present is important; the future is important. Do not let your mind race forward in time to 'what if' or what (disaster) might happen: that is the depression "catastrophizing". Work out your next step. Plan a short time ahead reasonably, and appropriately, and then leave it. See what happens, when it happens. Now is the important time; here is the important place: right here and now. Stay in the present moment as best you can. Try saying: "At this moment in time, everything is all right." Keep on telling this to yourself. Focus your thoughts on the little positive things.

Look to Your Strengths: Everyone is good at something; or has some interest in something; or enjoys something. Find out what interests you, what you like, what gets you going, what works for you. Get involved in that; forget the other stuff. Focus on what your strengths are. Move away from your depression, move towards health, prevention, collaboration, empowerment, wellness and happiness. You do have a choice; chose what works for you.

Prevention: All of these will also act as resources for the future. Do them, and it is a lot less likely you will become depressed again.

FITTING EXERCISE INTO YOUR LIFE

As mentioned, aerobic exercise is an important tool in the struggle to overcome depression. In fact it is excellent for all forms of mental health. It is great for general health as well: it can help to cut down on the risk of you developing a major illness and it can help you live longer as well. Regular exercise makes you feel and look better. It helps to release serotonin and endorphins – the ‘happy’ hormones, responsible for the ‘feel-good’ factor. It boosts your energy levels; reduces tension and anger; improves concentration; improves your sleep; increases heart and lung capacity; increases bone density; and has many other benefits for specific illnesses.

A little exercise goes a long way. You do not have to take out a subscription to a gym; run a marathon; or become a health freak. However – to overcome depression successfully – it is usually necessary to ‘fit’ more exercise into your life, somehow, and then try to keep doing it regularly. This is also a very good preventative measure against future health problems.

The best form of exercise is **aerobic** exercise – where you get out of breath, and feel a bit hot and sweaty. Ideally you should try to do this 3-4 times a week, for a minimum of 30-45 minutes each time. You can do this anytime anywhere: really try and find the time. Build up gradually to these ideals; but start now! Start when you put this booklet down.

Here are a number of suggestions:

- “Power-walk” (or jog) around the edge of the local golf course or park.
- Occasionally cycle or walk to work, or where you would have used the car.
- Get an exercise bike; put it in the corner of the bedroom or living room; and use it!
- Instead of watching or listening to your favourite ‘soap’ sitting down on the sofa – exercise whilst you do so, on the exercise bike; or put an exercise video in the machine and try and follow that.
- Most evenings, try to walk around the block for half an hour before you go in and then get ready for bed.
- Swimming 40 lengths (using different strokes) when you go to the swimming pool.
- Volunteer to exercise your neighbour’s dog: make him/her very happy and get lots of doggy love, whilst you get slim and trim.
- Get a ‘pedometer’, clip it on, and count your daily steps: try to build up towards 10,000 steps per day (most people do 3,000-5,000 anyway).
- Get out of the car on the way home from the weekly shop and power-walk the last two miles yourself whilst the others put the shopping away.
- Double-dig the garden vegetable plot; clear out the garden shed, attic or garage; make a compost heap (or turn it over).
- Get off the bus a stop early and walk the last few hundred yards.
- If it is raining, get busy with the housework: vacuuming (175 calories per hour), shopping (245), sweeping (280), cleaning the floor (315), painting (360), etc.
- If you are relatively immobile, get some mini-dumbbells and lift weights with hands and arms only. Lie on your back on the floor and do sit-ups and leg raises.
- Try take a point of doing one long walk (>6.5 miles / 10 km) every couple of months.
- Join up with a work colleague and exercise, play squash, or something similar during a lunch hour or after work once per week.
- Get a group of friends, church goers, work colleagues to form a team together, meeting once a month or so, to (say) raise money for charity by doing sponsored walks, competing with other teams, digging gardens, washing cars, etc.
- Work towards a long-term goal: power-walking a marathon (or half-marathon); doing the West Highland Way or the Pennine Way or one of the Coastal Paths; or walking a pilgrimage route, like to Santiago de Compostella; going on a cycling or trekking holiday.

RELAXATION

It is also important to relax as well. This helps you to re-balance your basic body functioning (Autonomic Nervous System), which often gets overstressed. For most people under stress, it is very difficult to relax – for 2 main reasons: (1) they (think they) don't have the time; and (2) they are so stressed that they cannot relax easily. It is therefore necessary to 'build-in' a programme of relaxation (ideally once a day for 20 minutes) and this should be done sometime after you do your exercise routine. There are many different ways to relax; here are several suggestions:

- **Progressive Relaxation:** You can get tapes or CD's of (usually) Progressive Relaxation exercises that tell you how first to tense, then to relax, all the various sets of muscles in your body. As you do this, you progressively relax more and more.
- **Autogenic Therapy:** I often teach people the principles of a form of Autogenic Therapy, a form of relaxation that was designed for people with hypertension, and works using a script and an image for the various parts of the body. The advantage of learning something like this system is that you can do it anywhere and without any special equipment. You can get a book that teaches you, or there are special therapists (in Edinburgh).
- **Music:** Certain types of music are very soothing and relaxing: Mozart, Chopin, some Bach, Boccherini, Albinoni, etc. Try to get some CDs or tapes and listen to these in the car, or at home, instead of the radio. Alternatively tune your car radio to Radio 3 or Classic FM rather than the news or pop music.
- **Warm Water:** This is very relaxing. Go for Radox-type baths, a nice long soak, with a candle or some music. Or get yourself to the nearest jacuzzi, maybe even in your lunch hour. Hydrotherapy is a well-established relaxation treatment.
- **Massage** is an excellent form of relaxation. It does not particularly matter what type of massage, but aroma-therapy massages are now quite popular and fairly readily available. They will usually cost between £20-30 but it is an excellent investment to kick-start you into a better pattern of relaxation and self-care. Ask your partner for a foot-massage as you watch TV together. Sometimes a bit of self-massage helps: first do the scalp; then the back of the neck; then one shoulder after another; then those tense muscles at the top of the chest towards the shoulder; and then those by the collar bones; can all be massaged by yourself, taking only a minute or two, whilst at work, and without any embarrassment. Stretch and yawn before you go back to work refreshed and more relaxed.
- **Breaks** are also important. You have scheduled tea-breaks at work: so take them. Don't work on through. You should have a half-hour minimum lunch break, by law: take it. Get out of the office or workplace. Don't pass up on holidays, or time in lieu. If you work from home: take 5 minutes every hour – as a minimum – and a lunch break away from your work. Arrange for quality time away, mini-breaks, long weekends, or whatever. Anything less than this is basically counter-productive in the long term.
- **Do Something Different:** A really good form of relaxation is to do something completely different. It doesn't have to be specifically relaxing: it could be something like Pilates, Tai Chi, Aikido or Yoga. Something physical is better than something sedentary, and these disciplines are more balancing than relaxing. But it could be a local drama group or a choir: something that will take you out of yourself, do something different and help you meet others as well.
- **Reading**, watching films or TV, listening to music or the radio, can also be very relaxing – in relatively small doses. It is best to have a regular routine and stick to it: reading the paper on the way to work; or watching the news or a favourite TV show at a set time.

RESOURCES

- Anxiety Disorder Resource Centre:** www.anxiety-uk.org A free resource centre for people with anxiety and anxiety disorders.
- Breathing Space Scotland:** www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk A good resources for information, advice, and sign-posting for various mental health issues and a range of related problems: financial and work issues, bereavement, pain, etc. The organisation also provides telephone support for sufferers.
- Doing Well:** www.doingwell.org.uk This website offers extensive advice and information on depression, its treatments, and how it is managed. There are some useful patient's stories and an opportunity to share your own experience. There is a self-assessment function and an emphasis on the management of depression.
- MIND:** www.mind.org.uk A national and excellent advocate for people with mental health issues giving information on and self-help about depression, mental health and related issues.

Edinburgh & Lothian Resources:

- Mental Health at Work:** www.mentalhealthatwork.info/links.htm
- Edspace:** Edinburgh & Lothian Mental Health Resources: www.edspace.co.uk Go to 'Links' page.
- MoodJuice:** www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk This NHS Forth Valley website has a number of downloadable documents containing information on how to cope with Anger, Anxiety, Depression, Panic Attacks, Bereavement, Post Traumatic Stress, Sleep Problems, etc. with lots of local contacts and further information.
- Lothian Psychological Interactive Network (L-PIN):** A series of downloadable self-help leaflets on common mental health problems from Lothian NHS: elpsych.org/self-help-leaflets

Self-Help Books:

- Brewer, Sarah (2000) *Simply Relax: The Beginner's Guide to Relaxation*. Duncan Baird.
- Burns, D. (2000) *The Feeling Good Handbook*. Plume.
- Butler, G. & Hope, T. (1995) *Manage Your Mind*. Oxford.
- Dryden, W. (2005) *Ten Steps to Positive Living*. Orient.
- Gilbert, P. (2000) *Overcoming Depression*. Constable & Robinson.
- Lowen A. & Lowen L. (1977) *The Way to Vibrant Health: A manual of Bioenergetic exercises*. Harper.
- Rowe, D. (1996) *Depression: The Way Out Of Your Prison*. Brunner-Routledge.
- Servan-Schreiber, David (2004) *Healing without Freud or Prozac: Natural approaches to curing stress, anxiety & depression without drug and without psychoanalysis*. Rodale.
- Shealy, C Norman. (1977) *90 Days to Self-Health - Biogenics: How to control all types of stress by yourself through a complete health program of Autogenics, diet, vitamins and exercise*. The Dial Press.
- Various: **Understanding** Series: (Mind Publications); **Mental Illness** (The Health of the Nation: BAPS) **University of Abertay, Dundee** Counselling Service leaflets4; **NHS Borders: Doing Well** series; **MoodJuice** ... and many others
- Williams, C. (2002) *Overcoming depression: a five areas approach*. Arnold. (Workbook 2 Practical Problem Solving)
- Worwood, V.A. (1997) *The Fragrant Mind: Aromatherapy for Personality, Mind, Mood & Emotion*. Bantam. ISBN: 0553407996 (Introduction to Aromatherapy)
- Young, C. (2010) *Help Yourself Towards Mental Health*. Karnac Books. ISBN: 1855754746

National Organisations & Help Lines:

- MIND** Info Line, PO Box 277, Manchester, M60 3XN. Tel: 0845-766-0163
- The Samaritans** The Upper Mill, Kingston Road, Ewell, Surrey KT17 2AF. Tel: 0208-394-8300: 24-hr 08457-90-90-90
- CRUSE** Bereavement Care, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 1UR. Tel: 0208-939-9530
- Compassionate Friends**, 53 North Street, Bristol BS3 1EN Tel: 0117-966-5202
- SANE**, Cityside House, #1, 40 Adler St., London E1 1EE Tel: 0207-375-1002: Help-Line 0845-767-8000
- NHS Help Line** Tel: 0800-22-44-88