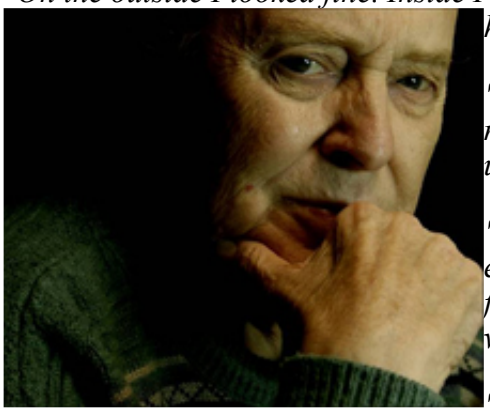
Is it depression?

"On the outside I looked fine. Inside I was gravely unhappy and I couldn't understand why. I felt helpless and hopeless for the first time in my life."



"It seemed as though everything made me cry. Friends and family told me to 'be strong' and to 'think positive.' For the life of me I tried. What used to work to lift my spirits just didn't work anymore."

"How could this happen to me? All I wanted to do was sleep. It took everything out of me just to get out of bed in the morning to get ready for work. I used to rise each day full of energy and eager to greet the world."

"I feel depressed." We've probably all uttered these words at one time or another in our lives. Most often we are referring to feeling sad or unhappy in reaction to something negative or bad that is going on in our life. Short episodes of feeling depressed in reaction to life situations are a normal, natural part of our emotional life. However, should feelings of sadness persist, a person may be experiencing depression, and that may require professional intervention and treatment.

The link between stress and depression

It is important to know that ongoing stress can lead to depression in some cases. Stress—depending on the reaction and the type of stress—can turn into depression. Watch out for the warning signs of depression, and pay attention to thoughts, feelings and symptoms that persist despite your best efforts to alleviate them. This will help you know which approaches might help you feel better, and function at normal, healthy levels.

It is common to experience feelings of sadness, the "blues" or to "be in the doldrums" on occasion. We can't be cheerful and "up" all the time-in fact, we may place such pressure on ourselves to be so, that this becomes a source of stress. Everyday experiences that cause stress—conflict with a spouse or our children, pressure at work, financial worries, the loss of an important relationship etc.—can also be triggers for depression.

The depression we experience in response to these situations may be mild and short-term, or it may be more complex and long-lasting. Experiences of extreme stress or loss may lead to a depression that requires professional treatment. If this happens to you or a loved one, you need to know when to seek help, and what type of help to seek. The resources that follow are a good starting point.

While it can be a debilitating condition, depression—even in its most critical form—is treatable. Counselling, medication or a combination of the two have excellent success rates in treating both minor and more serious cases of depression.

Understanding depression: a common condition

Depression is very common. Many people who experience depression feel that they are alone in their experience but this is not the case. According to the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) ten per cent of people will experience depression in their lifetime. Unfortunately, only five to six per cent of those afflicted will seek professional help.

There are indications that there may be a biological basis for depression. The exact cause of depression is unknown, however, research suggests that neurotransmitters or brain chemicals are involved as either a cause or consequence of depression.

As a result, certain medications which act on the neurotransmitters norepinephrine and serotonin—the brain chemicals thought to be implicated in depression—are effective as a treatment for depression.

However, the role that environment and situational factors play in depression can't be ignored. The most effective treatment for depression has been found to be appropriate medication in combination with counselling—a two-part strategy that yields greater results than either medication or counselling alone.

Triggers for depression

There are a number of things that may trigger an episode of depression including traumatic or stressful situations including: the loss of a relationship through death or divorce, financial worries, difficulties with children or a conflict-ridden work environment. Depression can also result from a physical illness, the side effects of some medications, hormone irregularities, or drug and alcohol misuse.

Approaches to treating depression

Counselling. Meeting with a professional counsellor can be very beneficial for a person experiencing depression. Counselling provides an opportunity to talk openly and confidentially about the feelings and thoughts a person is experiencing and to identify strategies for coping with them. Discussing and gaining insight into the circumstances that may have triggered the episode of depression can also be helpful.

Medication. Because of the imbalance of brain chemicals found in depression, anti-depressant medication that restores the chemical balance often plays a key role in its treatment. Your physician or pharmacist can provide you with extensive information on prescribed antidepressant medications and their use so that you can make an informed decision regarding your use of these medications. The local branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association is also a good source of information.

When a friend or family member is depressed

If a friend or a family member is depressed, one of the most helpful things that you can do for them is to encourage and assist them in getting professional help.

You can also:

- Work hard at being patient with the person
- Listen as best you can
- Offer encouragement—help the individual understand that they will get through this. Avoid obvious solutions such as "be strong" or "think positive"
- Invite the person to participate in activities, but keep these activities simple, and
- Share regular day-to-day conversations to help normalize interactions.

To ensure the strength of your own health and well-being, remember to take care of your own needs, and to take regular breaks from supporting your friend or family member.