

# **SELF HELP SHEET**

## **Student Counselling Service**

### **Depression**

Depression is a condition that is suffered by many people, often triggered by major life events such as loss of job, death of a loved one, separation and family problems. Many students will show depressive symptoms during their time at university. It is important to note that negative mood and “feeling blue” are not the same thing as depression. It is when the symptoms are ongoing that one can refer to depression. The characteristics of depression include:

- Depressed mood (feeling sad or negative)
- Loss of interest or pleasure (feeling flat or empty) in almost all activities once enjoyed, including sex.
- Significant weight loss or weight gain when not dieting, or decrease or increase in appetite.
- Waking up during the night or early morning and having difficulty returning to sleep.
- Psychomotor agitation (feeling restless) or retardation (feeling slowed down).
- Decreased energy or feeling tired.
- Feelings of worthlessness, self-reproach or inappropriate guilt.
- Diminished ability to think, concentrate, remember or make decisions.
- Recurrent thoughts of death, recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt, or a specific plan for committing suicide.

Other possible features include headaches, other aches and pains, or digestive problems.

### **Causes of depression**

No one simple factor has been identified as the cause of depression. There usually appears to be more than one reason, which might differ from person to person.

- People with a family history of depression have an increased probability of developing depression because of their individual make-up, (including body chemistry), or because of certain early experiences.
- Distressing events and the surrounding circumstances. If we are alone, friendless or have other worries we may get seriously depressed, whereas in happier times we could cope.
- Depression is a common accompaniment to physical illnesses, especially life-threatening ones like cancer and heart disease. Depressive episodes also appear to occur more often in individuals with a history of drug dependence and certain psychiatric conditions.
- A person’s deeper beliefs and assumptions can predispose them to depression.

Depressed people often feel themselves to be in some way worthless, failed or to blame for their own or other people’s plight. They may hold the view that the world is devoid of pleasure or gratification, and that immense barriers block access to goals. They may also hold the view that the future is hopeless.

### **Depression as a developmental reaction**

In the college population, certain developmental issues affect every case of depression and this can happen regardless of the person's family history and background, medical history and life circumstances. These issues involve:

- Changes in the balance between growing self-reliance and the need for attachment to family and peers.
- Over reliance on external standards at the expense of personal goals and ideals.
- Instances of student depression are usually associated with recent stressful events.

Most depressed students usually exhibit a depressed mood associated with feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness, and anxiety. Symptoms occur within three months of a clearly definable stressor, such as poor academic performance, break-up of a relationship or financial problems. However, some students experience depression in the absence of an identifiable stressor.

### **How to help yourself**

- Don't bottle up your thoughts and feelings. Try to tell people close to you about the things that upset you. Relieving the painful experience(s), having a good cry, and talking things through are part of the mind's natural healing mechanism.
- Try to keep active. Exercise or going out for a long walk will help you to keep physically fit and you may sleep better. Maintain routine activities like housework or going to the cinema. These help take your mind off painful feelings and may remove feelings of helplessness.
- Eat a balanced diet, especially fruit and vegetables, even though you may not feel like eating.
- Pinpoint your negative thoughts. An important source of our feelings is the way we think about the world and ourselves. It is possible to identify your negative thoughts and beliefs and substitute them with more reasonable, self-enhancing thoughts. Because negative thoughts tend to come into the mind automatically and seem completely valid, it is important to write down in order to develop a more objective perspective. You will discover that the negative thoughts are nearly always quite unrealistic as they contain what are called cognitive distortions.
- Read self-help books on recovery from depression like those listed below.

### **What treatment is available for depression?**

Effective treatment for depression is available. Talk to a counsellor or doctor. A counsellor will seek to understand *what you are experiencing* and will help you to;

- explore and resolve or manage any issues contributing to your depression
- identify practical suggestions to manage your depressive symptoms
- find techniques to cope with negative thoughts, cognitive distortions and dysfunctional beliefs if you are experiencing these.
- Refer you for medication if appropriate

A doctor can prescribe antidepressant medication when depression is severe or goes on for a long time. Antidepressants are usually very effective. Your doctor will find one which is suitable for you and will not prescribe it for longer than is necessary.

### **Further reading:**

Barker, P. J. (1993). *A self-help guide to managing depression*. London: Chapman & Hall.  
Burns, D. D. (1989). *The feeling good handbook: Using the new mood therapy in everyday life*. New York: William Morrow

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