

# **DEFEATING DEPRESSION**

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# UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION

The word depression of course means different things to different people. Some people may use the word to describe feeling generally fed up, sad and blue, or just moody and irritable. There are times when feeling this way may be perfectly normal: during a bereavement for instance, if we are having problems in a relationship, or when important events have not gone well.

However, in a clinical sense the word depression has a much more specific meaning. Clinical depressions are usually divided into one of two general types. In the first type often there is usually no clear reason why the person has become depressed. Nothing in particular seems to have triggered it off, it just starts 'out of the blue'. This type of depression is sometimes referred to as 'endogenous depression' or 'biological depression'. The word endogenous means 'coming from within' and suggests that no obvious changes or specific issues in the person's life can explain the feelings of depression at this time.

The person suffering with endogenous depression experiences an overwhelming sense of emptiness and misery. They feel powerless to do anything to help themselves and often descend into a state of feeling hopeless about themselves and the future. Often the person's sleep is very disturbed. They wake very early in the morning and find it difficult or impossible to get back to sleep. Mornings tend to be by far the worst time for people suffering with endogenous depression, their concentration is usually a problem, making it hard to attend to anything for more than a few minutes. Often they seem to do nothing, staying in bed all day, neglecting personal hygiene, not eating and generally losing interest in everything.

The second general type of clinical depression is called 'reactive depression'. This can often seem equally intolerable to the sufferer but usually at least, it does make some kind of sense, occurring as a reaction to some real event in a person's life. The person can usually tell you why

they are depressed, though often the intensity of their depression is difficult to understand. All of us at times will experience the loss of a loved one, or fail to achieve something that we really wanted, or be under immense pressure and stress, but for some people these events seem to produce a very intense emotional reaction which they can't seem to 'snap out of'.

It is also possible that an event in the distant past may be closely related to the development of the depression. Sometimes the emotions from these events just seem to overwhelm us, as if to be reminding us that we still haven't fully dealt with these issues.

Often the person experiencing reactive depression will also have disturbed sleep but the problem here tends to be a difficulty in getting off to sleep, often lying awake for hours thinking the same worrying or negative thoughts continuously. Usually the mornings are the best time. As the day goes on so the sufferer tends to feel increasingly negative and miserable. Sometimes friends and relatives can help to lift the person's mood by helping them join in a new or exciting activity. But, left alone, self motivation is very difficult and the person may spend hours doing nothing but feeling miserable and having thoughts of self pity and anger towards other people.

## ***USING MEDICATION***

Often your doctor will try to help you to lift out of your depression by prescribing antidepressants. These drugs are not addictive so there is no problem in coming off them once your mood has lifted, though you should come off them gradually. They work by increasing the amounts of certain specific chemicals in the brain which become reduced when we get depressed.

It has been estimated that 50% of people who are prescribed antidepressants by their doctor don't take them properly or don't take them at all! Perhaps this is because they have unrealistic expectations of the

medication, thinking it will immediately make them feel happy or better. Antidepressants usually take at least two weeks to reach their full effect. They must be taken daily, as prescribed, not just when you feel particularly low. Unfortunately people sometimes describe side effects with these tablets. Try to persevere, these may settle down. If not, go back to your doctor who may be able to change the medication for something that suits you better.

## ***USING THIS BOOKLET***

This booklet examines how we can help ourselves out of all forms of depression in two general ways. First, by learning to change the unhelpful patterns of behaviour that develop as we become increasingly depressed, and second, by learning to recognise and then change self defeating patterns of thinking which only increase our feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. The advice is equally applicable to those people taking medication and for those trying to beat their depression without tablets.

This booklet does not suggest any magical answers to your depression. What it does try to do is offer well researched practical advice to help you learn to help yourself to beat the problem and prevent the depression from returning.

The booklet is divided into two main sections. The first examines how we behave when we become depressed and the second examines how our thinking patterns change with depression. There is now very clear scientific evidence that shows that these changes in our behaviour and thinking have a very powerful effect in maintaining our depression.

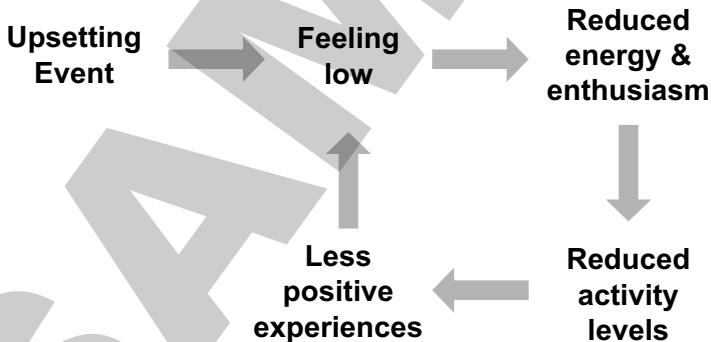
The two sections suggest practical ways of increasing our levels of activity and challenging our self defeating negative thinking. Learning these new self-help methods will take time. You must try to remain patient, taking one day at a time and being prepared to work hard every day with the ideas that you will read.

## **SECTION 1**

### **DEPRESSION AND THE WAY WE BEHAVE**

One of the first things that we can observe in people who become depressed is that they do much less. Their normal patterns of activity, their hobbies, interests and all physical activities just seem to stop. They might say that they've lost all enthusiasm for going out or meeting friends, or that they've got no energy to keep up their old routines. This pattern of reduced activity gradually becomes fixed. The less a person with depression does, the more they feel low and depressed and a vicious spiral is set up as the person's mood sinks down and down into ever deeper levels of depression.

This pattern of behaviour change has been studied extensively in psychology and psychiatry. The stages of this change have been analysed in very many theories of the development of depression. One description of this change is presented and described below:



The problem may start with an event which is upsetting in some way. This is not necessarily a sad event, though it often is, but it could also be a very demanding project at work, or the birth of a new baby, or any event that brings significant demands upon us. The demands of this event will often

cause a reaction in us. Many people develop specific physical symptoms at these times, e.g. tension headaches or aches and pains, others become anxious, and for some their mood begins to swing downwards.

Generally at these times people who are vulnerable to depression describe feeling low, empty, and not themselves. They usually want to be left alone and hope that by just doing very little for a while that they will soon come out of this state. As people begin to get depressed they find that their energy levels have reduced. The things that they were able to do easily the week before seem to exhaust them now. Additionally, they find it difficult to get enthusiastic about things that they previously enjoyed doing. Everything becomes a huge effort, even the simple things seem very demanding.

The next step, therefore, when the depressed person feels so lacking in energy and enthusiasm, is that they tend to stop doing things. They begin to stay in bed much longer in the morning, they start to miss appointments and break off arrangements. Gradually they reduce their commitments to the point that they've got nothing to get up for so they might just as well stay in bed. Friends gradually stop calling round and 'phoning because they know that their offer to meet up will be turned down. The depressed person becomes increasingly isolated.

For any of us reducing our activity levels will reduce our opportunity for new and exciting experiences. It is this novelty or diversity in life which brings most pleasure and enjoyment. The depressed person therefore begins to cut themselves off from the chances of having positive experiences. Their life becomes dull and routine, and they feel helpless and hopeless in this cycle of increasing inactivity and depression. Perhaps the only positive experiences that they have at this stage is the sympathy of relatives and friends. Unfortunately, in many ways, this may serve to reward the depressed person for behaving in this way and thereby increase the inactivity. Eventually however, even the most devoted and patient family member and friend can become fed up and irritated by their inability to help the depressed person to change.

## **BECOMING MORE ACTIVE**

As we become increasingly depressed so our activity reduces. We are slowed down physically and mentally, we become easily tired. Often we begin to blame ourselves for doing nothing, our self esteem gradually seeps away, we begin to believe that there is no way out and this feeling of helplessness ensures that we reduce our activity even further and so our depression intensifies.

Some psychologists believe that we become depressed when we begin to feel that we can no longer control what happens to us. If things go wrong often enough we can get to a point when we feel that there's no point trying to achieve anything because, regardless of our efforts, it will always turn out badly. Under these circumstances we learn to stop trying to influence our lives and we feel completely helpless. This condition is sometimes referred to as 'learned helplessness'.

Becoming more active is a very important part of breaking out of the vicious cycle of depression. Here are some reasons why:

- **Activity makes us feel less tired** When we feel depressed there is a very strong tendency to want to rest or sleep. The person feels exhausted and drained, totally lacking in energy. Normally when we feel like this it may be sensible to take rest but if these feelings stem from depression this is the worst thing that we can do. Resting under these circumstances simply makes the person feel even more tired and lethargic. What we must do is to try and increase our activity.
- **Activity distracts us** Being active will give the mind something to focus on and think about. Too often when we are doing nothing our mind wanders onto some worry or another and this is especially true when we are feeling low.
- **Activity can increase self-esteem** By being active we begin to feel in control again. We develop a sense of achievement. Doing something worthwhile, however small, is a positive step forward.

- **Activity will increase motivation** The more you do gradually the more you will feel like doing. Activity is like charging up a car battery. The busier you are the greater is the charge you create. If you do nothing for a long period of time then the charge in your battery will eventually drain away and the battery will go flat.
- **Activity improves your mental powers** Once you begin to become more active you will quickly find that your thinking and memory become clearer and sharper. Your concentration will also improve, as will your ability to see things in perspective and to solve problems.
- **Activity can involve others** Once people see that you are involving yourself in more things they will encourage you and help. No doubt they will be delighted to spend more time doing things with you now that you have given them some scope to help. Once others become involved in our activities we begin to make plans and commitments with them which help to keep us involved.

Despite all of these very positive effects of being active it certainly isn't easy to get going again. This is because the negative thoughts which always accompany depression will try to block your way. No doubt your mind will be telling you things like: 'I won't enjoy it', 'I'll make a fool of myself', or 'It's much too difficult'. It is usually these type of thoughts that prevent you from having a go. Learning to challenge these thoughts is an important part of the process of recovering from depression and so it will be dealt with in detail again later on.

**SAMPLE**

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