

# Depression

onTrac@PeterMac  
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH CANCER

## What is it?

### Depression

The word depression is used in our society to describe many emotions, such as feeling “sad”, “blue”, “down” or “upset”. We can all experience these emotions from time-to-time, particularly when faced with loss, illness or grief. These feelings of sadness are generally brief and have a relatively small impact upon normal functioning.

The term “clinical depression” is used to describe an emotional and psychological state that is intense and long lasting. This type of depression has serious effects on a person’s daily life and causes both physical and psychological symptoms.

Clinical depression is different from the sadness and shock that may be experienced following a cancer diagnosis and during treatment, even though this too can be intense and long lasting.

If you think you might be feeling depressed it is important that you talk with someone you trust. Depression is nothing to feel guilty or ashamed of and it is not the sign of a “weak” personality. It is also not permanent, but it is also not something that you can “snap out of”. If you are feeling depressed it is something that you will more than likely have to work on to improve.

## What thoughts or feelings might I experience?

Depression can affect the way you think, feel, and behave. Some signs that you may be experiencing depression include;

- Feeling sad or miserable most of the time – for at least 2 weeks
- Loss of interest in most things
- Loss of enjoyment in doing favourite things
- Social withdrawal – avoiding friends and social engagements
- Poor concentration – this may affect performance at school or work
- Hopelessness – feeling like there is nothing in life to look forward to
- Crying without reason
- Eating too much or not enough – this can result in unintentional weight gain or weight loss.
- Changes in sleep - Unable to get to sleep, or waking early in the morning (3-4am)
- Staying in bed feeling helpless and hopeless – and feeling like this is out of your control
- Changes in energy levels - Feeling tired all of the time or restless and agitated
- Poor self esteem – this can include feeling worthless and guilty
- Feeling like life is not worth living

## What can I do to help myself if I feel depressed?

By increasing activity and participating in enjoyable experiences you can help to reduce your depressive symptoms.

- Make a list of activities you need to complete as well as some that you find (or used to find) enjoyable. Make sure you write down as many activities as you can. Remember to also list activities that are only marginally enjoyable.
- Plan activity schedules each day to gain a sense of achievement when these are completed. Include enjoyable activities and try to increase the amount of time each day available to these.
- Think about what you have accomplished once you have completed a daily task. When participating in enjoyable activities think about their enjoyable aspects. Talk to others about activities they enjoy and reflect on positive experiences.
- Remember that when feeling depressed you often lack motivation to work through daily routines and things you enjoyed previously may not seem as enjoyable. Focus on the positive, no matter how small, and remember that as you recover the enjoyment you experience will increase.

Developing a regular, healthy sleep pattern will help improve your mood

- get up at the same time every morning regardless of how tired you feel
- avoid sleeping during the day or taking naps in the early evening
- reduce tea and coffee intake and do not have any tea or coffee after 4pm
- when you are lying awake at night, do not lie in bed trying to sleep for more than 30 minutes. Get up, go to another room and engage in a relaxing activity (ie reading, listening to music or relaxation exercises). Only return to bed when you feel sleepy again, and repeat this strategy as often as needed. It may take a few weeks to work but eventually you will break the pattern of being awake in bed.

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## What can I do to help myself if I feel depressed? (cont.)

Reduce your worrying and negative thinking.

- Plan your day so you have enough activities and tasks to focus on. Take rests periods during the day, but avoid too much unstructured time when your mind may wander and dwell on negative themes.
- Do at least one thing each day you enjoy. E.g. listen to your favourite song, look at your favourite photos, play computer games, make a card for someone.
- Try writing down your negative thoughts then take a step back and assess how realistic your negative thoughts are. Ask someone to help you look at things in a different way, and find other explanations for circumstances. Keep a record of these more helpful ways of thinking. Find a mantra that helps: e.g. "this will pass".
- Avoid excessive discussing of negative thoughts and feelings with friends or family. Try to focus on the positive aspects of situations. Negative thinking and dwelling on negative topics will not help you feel better.
- Set aside daily "worry time" of 15 minutes where you do nothing but ruminate about your problems. It might help to write them all down in point form. Once the time has finished leave all of your concerns behind and begin working on thinking more positive thoughts. If during the day you begin to focus on your worries, remind yourself that there is a designated time for this and move your thoughts away from your problems.
- Keep a journal of thoughts, identify negative unhelpful thoughts and try to correct them. Try not to spend more than 30 mins a day on this.
- Focus on your strengths, skills, achievements and things you like: e.g. that you are a good listener, or have good taste in music; identify the three most beautiful things in your environment and think about why they are meaningful to you.

Use relaxation and social support to reduce irritability and fatigue

- Take the time to tell your friends and family what you are going through. Help them to understand that if you feel irritable that it is not because you are unhappy with them, but rather because you are feeling depressed.
- Let your family and friends know how they can best support you.
- When you are feeling irritable or agitated, stop and take a deep breath. Ask yourself what is driving your emotions. If it is negative thinking, then use the above strategies to tackle negative thoughts. If you feel unmotivated, try to plan some enjoyable activities to do during your day.
- Practice regular relaxation activities: e.g. walking, deep breathing, meditation
- Organise regular times to talk with a support person about how you are coping. This might be a professional, such as your GP, a psychologist or a trusted friend.
- Having a regular activity plan can help overcome fatigue. Start with a small amount everyday and gradually increase this each week. E.g. You could start with 10 mins of exercise every day, 30 mins of social interaction and 20 mins of routine household chores. If you wake up feeling lousy, you will feel at least a little better if you get out of bed, have a shower and get dressed. Lying in bed all day makes most people feel worse.

Get professional assistance. There exists a range of treatments that can help you to manage your depression and alleviate its symptoms. These include psychological therapy, education and specific drug therapy.

## Where could I go for extra help?

Depression is a common condition. As such, there are many places that you can go to get extra help to assist you to overcome your situation.

- Your treating institution – talk to your oncologist, nurse or social worker.
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- Your GP
- Your local Community Health Centre
- A psychologist

You may also find some additional information and helpful hints from the following web sites.

- [www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)
- [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)
- [www.mentalhealthvic.org.au](http://www.mentalhealthvic.org.au)
- [www.depnet.com.au](http://www.depnet.com.au)
- [www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au)

See our handout on all the cancer related websites available for young people.

## Sources

Australian Psychological Society (2004). Understanding and Managing Depression: An APS Tip Sheet.

Mental Health services for Kids & Youth (MH-SKY Victoria). What is Depression? Fact Sheet.

Mental Health Foundation of Australia (The Options Project). Depression: Causes and Treatment Brochure.