

Depression is a common problem that can affect anyone at any age. It brings feelings that range from sadness and unhappiness to extreme misery and despair. Most of us have times when we feel sad or down. We usually can find our own way of coping with them. But sometimes feelings of depression don't go away. Their presence may be so overwhelming that it is hard to function normally. When this happens, it's important to get professional help.

How does depression affect people?

Depression causes people to have both unusually distressing feelings and physical symptoms. These feelings include: A sense of hopelessness or helplessness; life may seem meaningless, boring or empty; no longer finding pleasure in things once found enjoyable; loss of confidence or a feeling of worthlessness; or anxiety or agitation or panic attacks.

These physical signs can include: A loss of energy, fatigue or a feeling of 'heaviness' in the limbs; daily activities may seem harder; difficulty sleeping or sleeping more hours than usual; inability to concentrate, headaches or loss of interest in sex; loss of appetite or eating for comfort; and alcohol or drug abuse in an attempt to cope.

What causes depression?

Causes of depression are complex. It may start with a particular event or a difficult circumstance in our lives, such as, the death of someone close, separation from someone we love, ill health or the loss of a job. Other contributing factors may include poverty, feeling isolated because of difficulty speaking English or because no friends or family living nearby.

Not everyone with these problems feels depressed. People's reactions to things can depend on their personality and life experience. Someone that expects a lot of themselves and tends to be very self-critical may be more prone to depression. The same goes for people who are very dependent. A tendency to get depressed may run in families, too. It's also important to remember that depression can also be caused by chemical changes in the brain.

How severe can depression become?

In some cases people attempt suicide or try to harm themselves. They may even develop false beliefs thinking that they have done bad things in the past and deserve to be punished, for instance.

What about postpartum depression?

This is a special type of depression that affects some women after childbirth. Although it's common for women to feel "down" for a few hours or even a few days after childbirth, but for some women, the feelings of depression and anxiety persists for weeks, months or longer. They may have frightening thoughts, feel inadequate and find it difficult to cope with the demands of everyday life. Women who experience these symptoms need help.

Where can people get help for depression?

Anyone who has symptoms of depression for a long time or finds that their symptoms make it hard for them to function normally should get help. There are many different health professionals who can help people overcome depression. These include counselors, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists. A physician or community health center can refer you to someone who can help.

Source: New South Wales Health