

Recognising & treating depression

Throughout my time as a counsellor I have come across many people suffering from depression. It is an illness that is indiscriminate as to whom it effects. GPs currently issue 19 million prescriptions of SSRI antidepressant drugs a year for 3.5 million patients, suffering from both mild to suicidal depression.

Mild to moderate depression can be endured for months even years without the condition being recognised or diagnosed. It can be present since childhood, creep up slowly or come on suddenly following a time of crisis or stress. Symptoms can manifest themselves in many ways:

- Disruption in sleep patterns, insomnia or night wakening, or prolonged sleep
- Tiredness and apathy
- Loss of libido
- Lack of self-care and personal hygiene
- Self-absorption
- An inability to feel or over sensitivity
- Inability to cope
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Lack of purpose and joy in life

A client recently described it as being in the 'doldrums'. The doldrums is a place where boats get stuck as there is no wind or current to help propel movement they consequently have to wait until something changes. I can understand him feeling this way. However, there is help out there and something can be done.

As mentioned, many people's first call is to their GP. They

can prescribe SSRI drugs if necessary. These help raise serotonin, a mood related hormone, levels in the brain. This can prove crucial in alleviating symptoms relatively quickly, taking sometimes up to three weeks to work. This can be particularly useful for people in crisis or those unable to find the motivation needed to help themselves. Once out of the 'doldrums' it can then be possible to find other alternative long-term solutions, and methods of self-support.

Alternative methods

After having recognised the condition a person must make a decision to get well. Writing a plan of action and sticking to it can prove enormously beneficial. As depression stems from so many sources and manifests itself in varying ways, the key to successfully handling it lies in finding what works for the individual and their life style. There is a wide range of treatments that sufferers have found beneficial, St Johns Wort, herbal remedies, homeopathy, colour therapy and acupuncture and many more. If you find something that works, great, stick to it. However, there are a few life style changes that

I personally have witnessed having the most effective changes for the better:

- Regular sleep patterns
- Exercise
- St Johns Wort
- Omega 3
- Sunlight
- Touch
- Reconnecting with feelings especially in relationship

Exercise

Exercise is one of the best proven alternative treatments. One American study found that three brisk, thirty minute sessions of running, cycling or swimming each week produced better results than an SSRI drug. This is believed to be because the chemicals that determine mood - adrenaline, serotonin and dopamine are all produced during exercise. However, it is common in depression to find it hard to motivate oneself to exercise in the first place, which is when St Johns Wort and Omega 3 can prove helpful.

St Johns Wort, Omega 3

Edzard Ernst, professor at Exeter University believes the herbal treatment St Johns Wort to be the best alternative treatment. However, caution must be taken when used in conjunction with other medications. Clinical trials have shown it to be extremely effective particularly if the patient suffers from mild to moderate depression.

The other natural substance proving to have beneficial results is Omega 3 fatty acids called EPA. These are found in oily fish such as salmon, mackerel

and fresh tuna. Countries where the diet is rich in oily fish have significantly fewer cases of depression. Four studies have backed up the benefit of Omega 3 when it was found to raise EPA levels, EPA being found lacking in those with depression.

Sunlight and touch

Sunlight is also one of my top natural healers, with light therapy being a great substitute. Even those not prone to depression suffer from 'the winter blues' otherwise known as SAD, 'seasonal affective disorder'. The symptoms of SAD are actually surprisingly more physical than psychological. Light penetrates the brain through the eyes, which transmits neural impulses to cells in the hypothalamus. The hypothalamus directly influences appetite, sex drive, sleep cycles, body heat and mood. Disruptions in all these areas being symptomatic to depression. Traditional light therapy has been found to stabilise menstrual cycles, improve sleep quality, reduce carbohydrate cravings, enhance the response to antidepressants and increase testosterone secretion in healthy men by more than 60%.

Physical touch is another all round great healer, but particularly profound in helping to alleviate the symptoms of depression. Not only does it bring basic comfort but it can also give a sense of physical presence, helping to create and support personal boundaries. Any form of body massage

can help restore this, massage, reflexology, reiki or a good old-fashioned cuddle. Pets have proved helpful for their companionship and their soothing and calming effect.

Therapy and counselling

Depression can be a lonely and isolating experience, not only for the sufferer but also for those around them who can sometimes see the condition more clearly than the person themselves. This can be exacerbated by the depressed person failing to see the effects of their moods and behaviour. Carers are often sworn to secrecy to avoid embarrassment, fear of judgement or criticism. This can put great strain on partners and ultimately the relationship. However, a supportive relationship can be enormously helpful in overcoming and alleviating the illness.

Which leads me to my specialist area, the 'talking therapies'. Counselling can help identify the source of the problem and support the sufferer to explore the best ways for them to move into a better emotional space. There are many levels on which counselling works, opening up and trusting someone enough to allow them to witness and share your pain can be immensely healing. It can help give a distance between the person and the depression so that it is seen as a condition that is manageable rather than something that is engulfing. This allows the person to separate themselves sufficiently from the disease so that they can overcome it rather than be overwhelmed by it. The counsellors can help build confidence and explore

the functioning and able aspects of the individual. Realising you are not alone and the effects of your depression are acceptable to another without judgement can help restore a sense of compassion towards oneself. Many GPs recognise the benefits of counselling although funding in this area can be low and waiting lists long. Most can offer short term counselling ranging from six to twelve sessions of fifty minutes each. This focused work can be beneficial but many people prefer open-ended counselling without the pressure of a time frame and the aid of ongoing support.

If you or someone you love are suffering from mild or serious depression I wish you well. It is worth remembering that even sailors never are in the doldrums forever, however, I would encourage you to not just sit and wait for the wind to change but to try and find ways out of it yourself. However impossible it may seem it is possible to find ways to alleviate depression and there is help out there, you need not be alone.

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happier
when their
parents
have a successful
relationship.”**

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