

What is Depression?

Depression is another scary word and people throw around lots of different definitions, often without getting it right. It is more than feeling down or unhappy for a few days and it is not something you can just pull yourself out of immediately or sweep under the carpet. Some people think it's not real and see it as a sign of weakness, however neither of which are true. Depression is when you feel persistently sad for weeks or months, with little periods of happiness.

I would not say anxiety and depression go hand in hand but there are links between the two. Many people who suffer depression also have symptoms of anxiety. Like anxiety, there are many different symptoms and possible causes, as well as everyone having a different experience. Symptoms are both physical and emotional, it's not just in your head. Those symptoms include:

- Prolonged feelings of sadness, unhappiness and/or hopelessness
- Lack of interest in the things you usually/used to enjoy
- Constant tiredness and/or sleeping poorly
- Little/no appetite or sex drive
- Aches and pains

These symptoms range from mild to severe, at a mild level you may feel constantly low in mood for a few weeks whereas at a severe level you may feel your life is no longer worth living any more. Causes are again difficult to pinpoint, depression has no obvious cause and many whom experience it are unaware of any causes. Some possible causes are:

- Life changing events such as bereavement, losing your job, leaving home, or giving birth
- Family history of depression
- Addiction e.g. alcohol and drugs
- Loneliness
- Vulnerable personality e.g. constant low self esteem and self-criticism

Treatments for depression are not as extreme as one may think. Seeing your GP is a great way to start, explaining and talking about how you feel helps to diagnose if you have depression. Based on their assessment, they can recommend several treatments, ranging from simple lifestyle changes to possible medication. If you have mild depression they may see if it improves on its own while monitoring your progress. This is known as “watchful waiting”. As mentioned with anxiety, CBT is often used when combating mild to moderate depression. For more severe cases of depression, talking therapy and antidepressants are often used. Depending on your case, you may be referred to a specialist mental health team for a more intensive process of treatment and medication.

All of these treatments are helpful, they do take a strong will and persistence, but no matter how hard you are suffering there is always a better place and light at the end of the tunnel. Feelings are temporary and overcoming illness takes time. With any case of depression or anxiety, exercise, healthy eating, cutting down on negative habits and talking to people always help. It is a long process, but you will get through it.

How depression affected me...

Mentally...

I am happy to use it in the past tense however in no way do I ever play it down or act like it was never a part of me. I have had two instances/periods of depression in my life, I was diagnosed with depression from my parents who are both of medical background and with help from my GP back in Spring 2017. Although it is difficult to say exactly when I stopped “being depressed” the whole period lasted around 9-12 months. In this period, I was in a constant low mood and not much would change, I would be mostly okay during the day however the nights were often worse as I was alone with my thoughts. I did not help myself by hiding it to most people and acting like everything was fine, but I would not say I regret any of my actions. I went through CBT for around 2 months, this involved me talking to a therapist about all my feelings both good and bad and looking at ways I could overcome my anxiety and low mood. Overall, I would say it helped as I enjoyed releasing all my thoughts, it helped me to understand my thoughts and feelings rather than try and attack/remove them.

The second instance of depression was during the autumn and winter of 2018 during my first year of university. As mentioned before, I felt very isolated within my flat and suddenly became extremely low, I lost interest in my university work and found everyday tasks exceedingly difficult. With huge help from my s/o at the time, I planned out my days and took everything one day at a time, I focused upon myself and made sure the university was aware of my situation. I talked to the mental health team at university but that didn't quite work out. I was prescribed anti-depressants from my GP (sertraline to be exact) and I took these daily for around a year. They did help and from what I can recall they just maintained a steady mood for me so I wouldn't feel particularly sad or happy, however, overall, they did benefit me.

This period was shorter than the first, I was in an extremely vulnerable position away from home therefore getting help was not easy. I am extremely grateful for those who helped and came up to see me, they know who they are.

Physically...

The physical impact was similar to how anxiety affects me. My low mood caused me to lose interest in eating and exercising, I still enjoyed them, however I was less inclined to do so. My depression often caused me to become tired all the time and I did not help myself by going to bed ridiculously late. Because of my low mood my diet was extremely poor, I wouldn't eat a lot anyway but when I did it would be unhealthy snacks which definitely did not improve my low mood.

Ways friends can help

Be understanding – anxiety and depression are difficult to understand as it is, but when every person's experience is different it's an almost impossible task. No one can remove someone's anxiety or depression, but simply doing a bit of research on it can do the world of good. If someone suddenly cancels plans or is reluctant to attend a social gathering do not jump to conclusions. Examples being "they're so boring" or "they don't like us". Maybe think if there is something going on in their life and understand that everyone is different. Do not feel like there's nothing you can do, but at the same time do not think you can solve it.

Ask if they're okay – everyone asks “how are you” and “you alright” with the generated response being “yeah I'm fine” 99% of the time. But if one of your good friends seems a bit off maybe ask them personally “how are things at home” or “you seem slightly off is everything okay”. These questions are really awkward but at the same time they could be crucial in helping out someone's own battle. In my experience having someone listen to you is just as good as them giving you advice.

Know your limits – ultimately mental health is an illness, if you know someone is suffering do the first steps above as mentioned but know you are not a miracle worker. You cannot cure someone of anxiety or depression. From my experience it is a very personal battle, you have to know what is best for you before you can allow others to help you. Suffering in silence is not good but you have to be strong and fight a lot of it yourself, there's nothing wrong with being selfish when you are struggling. Your mind is your mind and that will never change. Only you know what is best for you. Never rely on someone else to fight your own battle and at the same time do not try and fight someone else's. Friends and family help a lot but having strength within yourself is fundamental and you will get through it.

Simple tips and helpful resources

- Exercise – was always an escape for me and helped more than I realised, healthy body does equal a healthy mind
- Music – a lot of music I listen to is relatable and it helps me relax and take my mind off things. Also motivated me to do a lot of things
- Social media – be extremely careful about stuff you see; someone may seem very happy according to their posts, but you never truly know what someone is going through
- Talking – doesn't have to be about your troubles! Talking is the first step to overcoming anything. Bottling it up is the absolute worst thing you can do, its awkward at first but you will not regret it once you speak out
- Headspace – good app I used that focuses on mindfulness and breathing techniques
- Help – do not google your symptoms, GP's and the NHS website are the best places to start. Help is always available no matter what the situation

- Family and friends – they are there for you no matter what. One friend/one family member can be enough! They won't solve anything on the spot, but a listener is a lot of help
- Distract yourself – don't lie in bed listening to sad music, it's a recipe for disaster. Take up new hobbies and do the things you love
- Be yourself – your mind is the greatest weapon, do not put it in a false state. Don't act how someone wants you to act

A friend's perspective...

My experience with anxiety has gone hand in hand with my experience with stress, which has been effectively lifelong and a vicious circle in which my anxiety has aggravated my stress and my stress has in turn added to my level of anxiety.

I have experienced anxiety on a consistent basis, never to a debilitating level but on a low grade and constant level throughout my daily life, small things add up to have a big effect. Normally new situations, eating at a restaurant I've never been to without people I feel okay with, getting on a bus, when I was younger I had such an aversion to trains and public transport it stopped me from doing quite a lot of things.

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