

DEPRESSION

Depressing news. The World Health Organisation (WHO – you may ask) has predicted that depression will be the second highest cause of death and disability in the world by the year 2020. It is estimated that depression is associated with half of suicide cases. So it is welcome news that this month the Government launched their three year National Depression Initiative, fronted by John Kirwan, to reduce the impact of depression on the lives of New Zealanders.

Anyone can become depressed. Depression is not a sign of a weak character. Nor can a person simply 'snap out of it'. Two of the most disturbing symptoms of depression are that it 'saps the will' and is extremely stressful.

Although depression is known as the 'common cold' of mental illness this phrase belittles the huge impact it can have on individuals and families. It is far less easy to recover from.

Depression is an illness. It can become much worse without proper care. If depressed feelings last for more than two weeks, or if you feel suicidal, you must seek help from your GP.

Understanding depression may not solve problems. Depression can turn your sense of order in life on its head making the process of regaining control of life and personality an uphill struggle.

One in five patients seeing their GP has experienced depression in the year of their visit. Women present twice as often as men and Maori three times more than Non-Maori. People are becoming depressed at an earlier age and more often, if single, in middle age.

Signs of depression may vary between individuals and over time. They include:

- Feeling miserable with feelings persisting despite some good things happening
- Loss of interest, motivation and pleasure in usual activities, including sexual activity.
- Loss of appetite and energy – even when not physically active.
- Sleeping difficulties despite feelings of exhaustion.
- Persistent worrying about trivial things, agitation, irritability and forgetfulness.
- Recurrent feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness and guilt – for no apparent reason.
- Fears about people, places and events – often leading to social isolation
- Thoughts of the attractiveness of death and suicide.

Depression can be a particularly isolating experience with many people lacking understanding of their symptoms. Men, especially, often do not wish to acknowledge their symptoms. Yet GPs and other complementary health professionals are experienced in understanding and helping overcome depression. It is advisable to learn as much as possible about available treatment options and those that are likely to work best for you. A combination of counselling, medication and support is recommended.

Understand that you must be kinder to yourself, treat yourself well, exercise, keep around positive people as much as possible and keep as busy as you are able to, provide structure to your days. Learn what helps you relax.

Two of the most important things to do are share your feelings with someone you trust and who will take the time to listen, and to seek professional help as soon as possible

Gordon Hudson is manager of Like Minds Taranaki, an organisation dedicated to demystifying mental illness, overcoming prejudices and discrimination and promoting mental wellness. Call (06)759-0966.