

2 Treating Depression

Factsheet for parents and teachers

Even severe depression can be highly responsive to treatment. As with many illnesses, the earlier treatment begins, the more effective and the greater the likelihood of preventing serious recurrences. Of course, treatment will not eliminate life's inevitable stresses and ups and downs. But it can greatly enhance the ability to manage such challenges and lead to greater enjoyment of life.

Types of Treatment for Depression

The most commonly used treatments for depression are antidepressant medication, cognitive behaviour therapy - (cbt), or a combination of the two.

Which of these is the right treatment for an individual case depends on the nature and severity of the depression and, to some extent, on individual preference.

In mild or moderate depression, one or both of these treatments may be useful, while in severe or incapacitating depression, medication is generally recommended as a first step in treatment. In combined treatment, medication can relieve physical symptoms quickly, while psychotherapy allows the opportunity to learn more effective ways of handling problems.

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Medications

Antidepressant medications are not habit-forming. To be effective, medications must be taken for at least 4-6 months (in a first episode of depression), carefully following the doctor's instructions. Medications must be monitored to ensure the most effective dosage and to minimise side effects.

The prescribing doctor will provide information about possible side effects and dietary restrictions. In addition, other medically prescribed medications being used should be reviewed because some can interact negatively with antidepressant medication. There may be restrictions during pregnancy.

COGNITIVE BEHAVIOUR THERAPY

It is a way of talking about:

- How you think about yourself, the world and other people
- How what you do affects your thoughts and feelings.

CBT can help you to change how you think ("Cognitive") and what you do ("Behaviour"). These changes can help you to feel better. Unlike some of the other talking treatments, it focuses on the "here and now" problems and difficulties. Instead of focussing on the causes of your distress or symptoms in the past, it looks for ways to improve your state of mind now.

CBT can help you to make sense of overwhelming problems by breaking them down into smaller parts. This makes it easier to see how they are connected and how they affect you. These parts are:

- A Situation - a problem, event or difficult situation
From this can follow:
- Thoughts
- Emotions
- Physical feelings
- Actions

Each of these areas can affect the others. How you think about a problem can affect how you feel physically and emotionally. It can also alter what you do about it.

Treating Recurrent Depression

Even when treatment is successful, depression may recur. Studies indicate that certain treatment strategies are very useful in this instance. Continuation of antidepressant medication at the same dose that successfully treated the first episode can often prevent recurrence. Counselling (such as those described above) can also lengthen the time between episodes in people who aren't on any medication.

The Road to Recovering from Depression

It's important to be able to recognise the symptoms of depression (see fact sheet 1 in this series) This is the beginning point in the process of treatment.

The next step is to be assessed by a qualified professional. Depression can be diagnosed and treated by both mental health professionals and GPs. A thorough physical examination may be recommended to rule out any physical illnesses that may cause depressive symptoms.

Treatment is a partnership between the patient and their health care provider. An informed client knows their treatment options, and discusses concerns with their provider as they arise.

Depression can make you feel exhausted, worthless, helpless and hopeless. Such feelings make some people want to give up. It is important to realise that these negative views are part of the depression and will fade as treatment begins to take effect.

Along with treatment, there are other things you can do to help yourself get better. Some people find participating in support groups very helpful. It may also help to spend some time with other people and to participate in activities that make you feel better, such as mild exercise. Just don't overdo it or expect too much from yourself right away. Feeling better takes time. Your treating professional may be able to suggest other self-help strategies.

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