

# Depression is more than just a low mood

**When a person is depressed, it affects both their body and their mind. It involves changes in brain chemistry, and this can change the way people respond to situations. Because it disrupts the body's basic systems, it can make the person feel physically unwell.**

## **+ you don't need to suffer, depression is treatable.**

No matter how severe the depression is, treatment should be supported by changes to lifestyle. It's important to cut down on stress, reduce or stop using alcohol or other drugs, maintain regular exercise and good nutrition, sleep well, and learn new skills such as problem solving. See Fact Sheets 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13 for further information on effective lifestyle and self-help options.

It also helps to talk about your depression with your family/whanau, or a trusted friend, particularly if your symptoms get worse at any time. It's common for people who have depression to have thoughts about harming themselves. It's important not to be alone if you are having these thoughts, and talk about them with someone you trust, or your health professional.

Most depression is able to be treated by your family doctor, although sometimes he or she will involve a specialist, to provide advice or take over treatment for a while. Your doctor may refer you to a counsellor, psychiatrist or psychologist, or a community based mental health team provided by your local District Health Board.

## **If you want to talk to someone who can help:**

Call the Depression Helpline on **0800 111 757**

Text The Lowdown team for free on **5626**

Or talk to your doctor

Research shows that treatment for depression is most effective when:

- You and your health professional develop a trusting relationship and work together to find the best treatment for you.
- The factors that contribute to your depression are identified and worked on.
- Treatment is continued for as long as necessary to address the underlying causes, and your situation is reviewed until your mood has lifted.

There are two main treatments for moderate to severe depression, which are anti-depressant medication and psychological therapy (also known as talking therapy). The research evidence shows that for most people medication or talking therapy are equally effective for people with moderate depression, and a combination of both treatments is most effective for severe depression.

## **+ anti-depressant medication**

Depression involves changes in brain chemistry, and this can alter the way a person responds to everyday life. Anti-depressant medicines are effective for most people in helping to restore a chemical balance. There are different types of medication and some will be more effective or suitable for you, depending on your particular situation and needs. People respond differently to different treatments, and combinations of treatments. By discussing the options with your chosen health professional, and possibly trying them out, you can find the treatment that works best for you.

Anti-depressant medications treat the symptoms of depression and can help you to manage your illness. They can quickly relieve poor sleep, anxiety, tiredness, poor appetite, poor concentration and agitation. They are safe and effective and they are not addictive, although after the treatment has finished, some people experience side effects including dizziness, nausea and headaches if they stop taking their medication too suddenly. This is called 'discontinuation syndrome' and can be avoided by gradually reducing the dosage in discussion with your doctor.

However, just like many medications for physical illnesses, they can have side effects, which your doctor will fully explain and monitor. If you experience any unpleasant side effects, it may be possible to adjust the dose, change the medication to control them or reconsider the pros and

cons of medication for you. It's important to follow your doctor's instructions when taking any medications, and to let your doctor know if you are having problems with any of them.

Anti-depressants take several weeks to have their full effect, and are usually prescribed for a period of time after your symptoms have stopped (six to 12 months) to prevent relapse of the depression.

The table below summarises basic information on the available anti-depressant treatments that are known to be effective, with some comments on their safety and possible side effects. New medications and information do become available all the time, and up-to-date information can be accessed on [www.medsafe.govt.nz](http://www.medsafe.govt.nz). Your doctor will discuss your drug therapy choices in more detail with you, taking into account your personal situation.

| Treatment  | Effectiveness issues  | Safety issues and side effects  |
|--|---|---|
| <b>Serotonin Selective Reuptake Inhibitor (SSRI) anti-depressant medication, eg fluoxetine, paroxetine, citalopram etc</b> | These anti-depressants take up to four weeks before you notice a difference. They are the most commonly-used of the anti-depressant drugs.  | Some people feel agitated when they first start taking SSRI's and you should tell your doctor if this happens to you. Side effects are not common but may include nausea, difficulty in going to sleep, headaches and sexual problems.<br><br>There have been concerns raised in the media from time to time about these drugs prompting suicidal behaviour in young people, but these have never been definitively proven. If you experience suicidal behaviours at any time it is important to tell your doctor or someone you trust. |
| <b>Serotonin and Noradrenaline Reuptake Inhibitor (SNRI) eg venlafaxine.</b>   | These are usually used when other treatments have been unsuccessful or for severe depression.   | Side effects are not common, but may include nausea, reduced appetite, headache, sweating, rashes, agitation and sexual difficulties.   |
| <b>Tricyclic Anti-depressants (TCA's) eg imipramine, nortriptyline etc.</b>  | These drugs work in a different way from SSRI's, and may also take up to four weeks to have an effect. They are more likely to be used if the depression is severe and/or another treatment has not worked well enough. | Side effects are more common than with SSRI's, especially early in treatment. Not suitable with certain other medical conditions. Side effects can include drowsiness and a dry mouth, blurred vision, constipation, difficulty urinating, sexual problems and weight gain. TCA's can be lethal if taken as an overdose.  |

## + psychological therapy

Talking with a health professional trained in a proven talking therapy has been shown to be as effective as drugs for people with mild to moderate depression and anxiety. It is sometimes used alongside drug therapy, and is best done this way for severe depression, but it can also be effective as an alternative to taking anti-depressant drugs, or as a follow-up to drug treatment for moderate depression.

There are a range of different talking therapies that have different theories behind them. What they have in common is that talking therapy usually involves talking honestly to the therapist about how you feel and how you relate to others. Your therapist will listen carefully and spend some time working alongside you to understanding your situation, and then support you to find a way to deal with your depression that works for you. Depending on the extent of your problems and the type of talking therapy, you will need to have at least six hour-long sessions with the therapist, depending on your situation and needs.

The research evidence shows that there are a few different types of talking therapies which are effective for depression.

### Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

The best known and perhaps most practiced in New Zealand is called Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, or CBT. In CBT the therapist works alongside you to identify how you feel, what you think and how you react to circumstances and problems. The idea is that if you talk about how you currently deal with issues in your life, you can find new ways to approach them which leave you feeling better. CBT helps you gain new skills to manage your illness and remain well.

Psychological therapy programmes based on CBT are increasingly being developed for use over the internet, and some of these have already been found to be effective, such as Moodgym, an Australian e-therapy programme available on [www.moodgym.anu.edu.au](http://www.moodgym.anu.edu.au).

New e-therapy programmes are also being developed and/or trialled in NZ.

### Structured Problem Solving

Structured Problem Solving is another effective talking therapy for mild-moderate depression that is based on similar principles as CBT – that how you think about things affects how you feel and behave. It aims to teach a ‘thinking skill’ – a way of solving problems which shows you how to step back and evaluate problems in a structured way. You can use the material on this website or read Fact Sheet 13 – Structured Problem Solving if you want to try out the techniques on your own.

Problem solving helps you to:

- Recognise what is causing you to feel bad.
- Become aware of the support you have, and your own personal strengths.
- Develop an approach to deal with current difficulties.
- Feel more in control of your problems.
- Deal more effectively with problems in the future.

## Interpersonal Therapy

Interpersonal Therapy (IPT) is another form of talking therapy that has been proven to be effective for depression and anxiety. It is a form of psychotherapy, which links what has happened in the past to what is happening in your life at present. IPT is a structured programme that helps you to improve your communication skills and get on better with others.

The following table summarises some of the talking therapies that are known to be effective, and some of the issues that need to be considered in using them.

| Talking Therapy  | Effectiveness issues  | Other considerations   |
|--|---|--|
| <b>Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)</b>                           | CBT has been found to be as effective as anti-depressants for people with mild to moderate depression. It also helps the person to develop personal skills that can help prevent relapse.                               | It can be hard to find a suitably skilled therapist in your locality. Counselling can be expensive if you see a therapist privately, but may be available to you free or subsidised through your doctor. |
| <b>Problem Solving Therapy or Structured Problem Solving (SPS)</b> | Has been proven to be as effective as anti-depressants for people with mild to moderate depression, and can also help prevent relapse. The techniques are simple and easy to learn and use.                             | SPS may be available through your doctor as part of their support for mild to moderate depression.   |
| <b>Interpersonal Therapy (IPT)</b>                                 | IPT is a form of psychotherapy that follows a specific format looking at your relationships with others. It has been proven to be as effective as drugs in helping to treat depression and anxiety and prevent relapse. | IPT is not widely used in NZ, so it may be hard to find a suitable therapist.  |

## + getting help

**If you want to talk to a trained counsellor about how you're feeling, or you've got any questions, you can:**

- **Call the Depression Helpline on 0800 111 757**
- **Text The Lowdown team for free on 5626**

They can listen to your story, and come up with ideas about what might help. They can also put you in touch with health professionals close to where you live, if that's what you want.

**Or for more information you can visit:**

**[www.depression.org.nz](http://www.depression.org.nz) or [www.thelowdown.co.nz](http://www.thelowdown.co.nz)**

The Ministry of Health would like to acknowledge information sourced from: NZ Mental Health Survey 2006, NZ Guidelines Group, Royal Australian and NZ College of Psychiatrists, MaGPIe Research Group, Beyond Blue (Australia).

For more information and fact sheets visit  
[www.depression.org.nz](http://www.depression.org.nz)

[newzealand.govt.nz](http://newzealand.govt.nz)