

COUNSELLING SERVICE

OVERCOMING DEPRESSION

UNIVERSITY OF
WESTMINSTER

MIND MATTERS

OVERCOMING DEPRESSION

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

Everyone feels unhappy, sad or fed up from time to time. These moods may last a few hours or a few days and people pull through, usually with some support from friends or family. However, you may not be able to lift yourself out of a low mood. Depressing thoughts and feelings may become overwhelming and it may become hard to cope with everyday tasks. If you find this happening, it could be that you are experiencing a period of depression.

Depression is not ordinary sadness, nor is it a weakness or a character defect; it is a condition that affects a person's mental and physical well being.

A person who is depressed may have:

- Low mood that persists over weeks or months
- Feeling hopeless, helpless and worthless
- Feeling irritable, angry with oneself or others
- Difficulty in getting to sleep, waking early, or feeling unable to get out of bed
- Feeling tired all the time
- Loss of appetite or eating more than usual
- Poor concentration and short term memory
- Avoiding friends and social contact, wanting to shut the world out
- Not looking forward to pleasurable events and not enjoying anything
- Using alcohol, drugs or smoking to try and cope
- Wanting everything to stop, to go away
- Suicidal thoughts.

WHAT CAUSES DEPRESSION?

Sometimes depression may be a reaction to a major life event or change, such as bereavement, the end of a relationship, the ending of a course or an accident. It is normal to feel sad in these situations, but when the low mood is prolonged or intense, it may become depression.

- Depression may follow a series of life events, stresses or difficulties, where the cumulative effect wears down a person's capacity to cope
- Depression can follow an illness, particularly a viral infection
- Sometimes depression appears to come out of the blue, to affect someone who seems to have everything going for them. Many distinguished and high achieving people suffer bouts of depression associated with perfectionism and the fear of failing or not achieving goals.

Student life brings its own stresses and pressures and it may not be 'the best time of your life'. Overall, depression occurs in one in ten adults or ten per cent of the population in Britain at any one time (Office for National Statistics 2000).

DEPRESSION COULD BE CONSIDERED A FAIRLY NORMAL PART OF LIFE.

"...DEPRESSION IS NOT ORDINARY SADNESS,
NOR IS IT A WEAKNESS OR A CHARACTER DEFECT..."

HOW YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF

THERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO WHICH MAY HELP TO LIFT YOUR MOOD:

- If you have stopped doing some of the things that used to make you feel good, pick up these activities again, such as going out with friends or listening to music
- Aerobic exercise helps to boost the production of mood enhancing chemicals, so, regular exercise, walking, swimming or dancing can help
- Spend time with friends. Isolation can increase depressed and paranoid thoughts and feelings. If you have a friend or someone you trust, talk to them about how you are feeling. It may help you to feel less isolated and they may be pleased to have the opportunity to help
- Do not sit in front of your work for hours when you are unable to think clearly. Depression often affects concentration and short term memory. These will improve gradually as your depression lifts. In the meantime, just do what you can, at times, when you feel able to study
- Speak to your personal or senior tutor or to a member of staff in your School to let them know about your difficulties
- Natural remedies may relieve mild depression and some people find homoeopathy helpful. It is always advisable to consult your GP first
- Try to resist the temptation to blank things out, or manage sleep disturbance, by using alcohol, drugs or tobacco. These may provide temporary relief but they do not resolve the depression and they may make things worse

- If you feel at risk of harming yourself, or if you are having ideas about suicide, speak to someone who can help you. There are many people in the University to whom you can turn for support. Initially, you may prefer to speak to someone you know, such as your personal or senior tutor, or a member of staff in your School. They will put you in touch with specialist services, if necessary. You may prefer to approach the Counselling Service, or the Students' Union. Out of normal office hours you can contact your GP's out of hours service or go to the Emergency Department at the nearest hospital
- If your difficulties are affecting your academic work, talk to your personal tutor or a member of staff in your School so that they can help you with arrangements for course work or exams
- There are specialist organisations providing advice, information and support and you can find their details on the Internet and from the Counselling Service webpage at westminster.ac.uk/counselling

"AEROBIC EXERCISE HELPS TO BOOST THE PRODUCTION OF MOOD ENHANCING CHEMICALS SO, REGULAR EXERCISE, WALKING, SWIMMING OR DANCING CAN HELP"

HOW YOU CAN HELP SOMEONE ELSE

IF YOU THINK A FRIEND, OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW, MAY BE SUFFERING FROM DEPRESSION, THERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO THAT MAY HELP. HOWEVER, THERE ARE ALSO LIMITS TO WHAT YOU CAN DO AND IT MAY BE THAT THEY NEED SPECIALIST HELP.

- Depression can distort a person's inner world into a nightmare of negative thoughts and feelings. As a friend, you can help by listening and by reminding them of reality. It is not helpful to imply that someone experiencing depression should pull themselves together as this is precisely what they cannot do
- It can be difficult for someone with depression to ask for help as they often blame themselves for the way they are feeling. They may think they are being lazy or weak. Depression is a condition that responds to medical treatment. You can help by understanding this and helping your friend to understand this. If you can, encourage them to contact their GP, or the Counselling Service
- People experiencing depression can be very difficult to be around. They may be irritable, frustrating and rejecting, particularly towards those closest to them. This may be a reflection of how hopeless, helpless and worthless they are feeling about themselves. Try not to be put off by this behavior
- Try to encourage them to keep up the activities they enjoyed prior to the depression, particularly exercise and social activities

HOW YOU CAN HELP SOMEONE ELSE

- Do not encourage them to use alcohol or drugs to relax or forget their problems. These may bring temporary relief but they will not resolve the depression and may make it worse
- You need to take care of yourself as supporting a person with depression can be draining. Take time away or with other friends as well. It is not selfish to look after yourself first. You may need some support or advice yourself. If you are concerned about someone, you can seek advice from the Counselling Service
- If your friend or someone you know is talking about suicide, either directly or in vague terms, take it seriously and encourage them to see their GP. If this is not possible, speak to someone who can intervene. This may be a member of staff in your halls of residence, your School or the Counselling Service.

“ IF YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT SOMEONE,
YOU CAN SEEK ADVICE FROM THE
COUNSELLING SERVICE.”

WHEN SPECIALIST HELP IS APPROPRIATE

DEPRESSION NEED NOT LAST FOREVER, SOMETIMES IT WILL LIFT QUICKLY, PARTICULARLY IF THE CAUSE IS RESOLVED.

However, depression can last for many weeks or months at a time when the pressures of coursework and exams may demand clear thinking and concentration.

“SOMETIMES, SELF-HELP AND PRACTICAL
AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FROM FRIENDS
AND FAMILY, WILL BE SUFFICIENT.”

WHEN SPECIALIST HELP IS APPROPRIATE

You may, however, feel anxious about worrying others, or feel uncomfortable talking with them about personal issues.

YOU MAY FEEL TOO LOW TO MOTIVATE YOURSELF TO TAKE THE FIRST STEPS TO RECOVERY. IF THIS IS THE CASE, THERE ARE A NUMBER OF RESOURCES AT THE UNIVERSITY AND IN LONDON THAT MAY BE HELPFUL.

Treatment for depression may include counselling, medication or alternative therapies.

If your GP assesses that you are clinically depressed, he or she may suggest a course of anti-depressants. Clinical depression is associated with changes in the brain chemistry that regulates the production and distribution of serotonin, a naturally occurring, mood-regulating substance.

The most frequently prescribed anti-depressants help your brain to produce and distribute serotonin more efficiently, which can lift your mood sufficiently to allow you to deal with the issues which are troubling you.

WHERE YOU CAN FIND HELP

INSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

- The **Counselling Service** offers free, confidential, individual and group counselling and workshops to all students. The service also offers support and guidance, to those concerned about the welfare of a friend or relative. To arrange an initial appointment, telephone 020 7911 5000 ext 66899 or email counselling@westminster.ac.uk
- The **Student Advice Service** offer advice and information on funding, benefits, visa and immigration matters. They can be contacted via email studentcentre@westminster.ac.uk. See westminster.ac.uk/advice for more info.
- **Disability Learning Support** offer information, support and advice with managing as a student with physical disabilities or mental health conditions. Tel 020 3506 8800 (Central London) or visit westminster.ac.uk/disability for more info.
- The **Students' Union** offer advice and support. They can be contacted on 020 7911 5000 ext 5454 or email su-info@westminster.ac.uk. Visit uwsu.com for more info.

OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

- Your **GP** can offer you support, advice, medical treatment or referral to specialist help. All GP practices offer an out-of-hours service for emergencies.
- **London Nightline** offers a confidential telephone listening service, run by students for students, which is available from 6pm-8am every night during term-time, Tel 020 7631 0101.
- **The Samaritans** offer a listening ear 24 hours a day, Tel 116 123, this number is FREE to call.
- Information, resources and links to useful organisations can be found at studentdepression.org

DETAILS OF OTHER SPECIALIST HELP CAN BE FOUND AT WESTMINSTER.AC.UK/COUNSELLING

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