

Feeling better: Identifying and treating depression

One in four Canadians will require treatment for depression during their lives. Unfortunately, only about one third of those people will ever ask for help. While depression is quickly catching up to heart disease as the largest cause of disability in the world, many people still do not understand this serious illness.

Depression is more than just “feeling blue.” It is a debilitating illness that affects how you feel, think and behave. While it can be triggered by a sad event in a person’s life, depression is not the same as sadness or grief. These emotions are normal reactions to stress and loss, and tend to get better with time. Depression, on the other hand, is an illness with physical, emotional and psychological symptoms, and can affect every aspect of a person’s life. Left untreated, depression can last for years, and prevent people from succeeding at work, home and everyday life.

Thankfully, there is hope. Changing the way you think, how you behave, your relationships and even taking medication for a specific period of time can help you feel better. And while you may feel right now as if things are hopeless and nothing will help, just talking to your family doctor or EAP counselor about your feelings is a giant first step towards recovery. There is no reason for anyone with depression to continue to suffer. There are treatments available, and there are people who understand what you are going through and want to help.

Identifying the symptoms

The first step to getting help for yourself or a loved one is to understand the signs and symptoms of depression. People with depression do not feel sad all of the time. In fact, they can have periods of time when they feel happy or hopeful. But these do not last, and end up “down” or “depressed” most of the time. Many people lose interest in the things they once loved to do. Others may want to sleep all the time, or not be able to sleep at all.

Because people with depression have many different symptoms, it can be difficult to diagnose. However, doctors generally consider a person to be suffering from depression if he or she demonstrates several symptoms at once for more than two weeks at a time.

Symptoms of depression can include:

- Change in appetite, with resulting weight loss or weight gain.
- Change in sleep patterns, sleeping too much or trouble falling asleep.
- Decreased energy, feeling tired, or slowed down.
- Difficulty thinking, concentrating or making decisions.
- Feelings of sadness, irritability or tension.
- Decreased interest or pleasure in usual activities or hobbies.
- Feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness or excessive guilt.
- Thoughts of suicide or death.

Feeling better (continued)

Asking for help

If you think that you, or someone you love, may be suffering from depression, it is important to seek help. Depression is not something that will go away on its own, and many of its symptoms can be warning signs of other medical problems. Talking with a family doctor, psychologist, nurse, counselor or other medical professional will help rule out other causes for the way you feel and start you on the road to recovery.

But while asking for help is the most important step towards feeling better, many people also find it the most difficult. You may feel embarrassed, or that your symptoms are too “small” or “silly” for your doctor to care. Many people also worry about what others might think if they found out they were seeking help for depression.

The truth of the matter is that depression is a serious illness requiring professional treatment. It is not a sign of personal weakness, and it is not anyone’s fault. Many people find that just talking about their feelings makes them feel better. Remember, your doctor and EAP counselor want to help, and have been trained to do so.

Treatment options

Once you have asked for help, your doctor, counselor or other health professional will help you set up an appropriate treatment plan. There are many different treatment options available for depression, and often these work best in combination with one another.

Psychotherapy (Talk therapy)

Psychotherapy, or talk therapy, involves regular sessions with a counselor or mental health professional, who will help you understand and accept your illness as well as develop strategies to cope with life’s challenges.

Psychotherapy can be one-on-one, or involve your partner and other family members. It may focus on immediate conflicts with other people, or delve into deep-rooted personal issues. It may also help you recognize and change negative patterns of thinking, or change your behaviour when responding to problems.

Peer Support (Self-help groups)

Support groups are valuable resources for depressed people and their families. By sharing common experiences and encouraging each other in their treatment, these groups have been found to have a positive impact on recovery and to prevent relapses.

Medication

There are many different types of antidepressants and mood stabilizing medications available to treat depression. Your doctor will explain how these work, and help you make the best choice for your health.

If you decide to treat your depression with a medication, remember to be patient. People often have to wait two to six weeks before they begin to feel the positive effects of these drugs. During this time it is important to keep in touch with your doctor, and discuss any fears, concerns or side effects you may be experiencing. Your doctor will be able to reassure you about your choice, or suggest a different treatment plan.

Hospitalization

People suffering from severe depression, especially those with other medical conditions or without appropriate support at home, may need to spend time in a hospital before they can feel better.

Supporting someone you love

Supporting a loved one who is suffering from depression takes understanding and patience. Their personality may change, and they may become uninterested in family, friends and even children. Because they may feel hopeless about the future, they may also resist treatment and other attempts to help.

In fact, depressed people often have to “borrow” confidence and optimism from someone else to get started and stick with their treatment. Here are some tips for lending support:

- Learn as much as you can about depression and its symptoms.
- Encourage the person to seek medical help.
- Model healthy eating and sleeping habits, and discourage the use of alcohol and drugs.
- Encourage the person to take part in activities they used to enjoy, especially exercise.
- Take time for yourself, and don’t get burned out.

Websites about depression

- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (<http://www.camh.net>)
- Mental Illness Awareness Week (<http://www.miaaw.ca>)
- Mood Disorders Society of Canada (<http://www.mooddisorderscanada.ca>)
- Government of Canada: Canada Health Portal (<http://chp-pcs.gc.ca>)

Family Services offers confidential professional assistance on a wide variety of personal and work-related issues. For more information on your EAP, call :

1-800-668-9920