

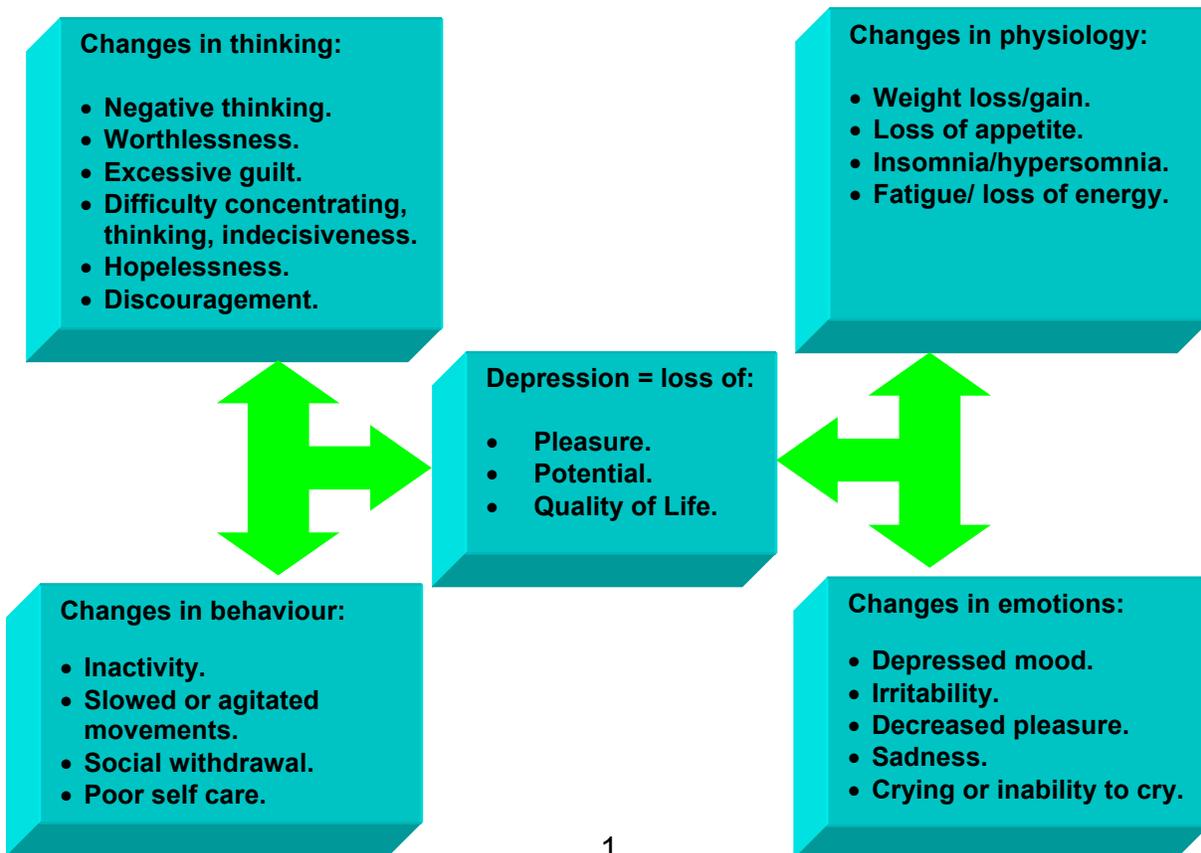


GETTING OUT OF DEPRESSION

What does it mean to feel depressed? We typically use words like blue, down or sad to describe depression. However, these are in fact synonyms that describe the level of intensity of depression. Depression means that you perceive some sort of loss, which can be of pleasure, a quality of life or an unfulfilled or lost potential. For example, I feel sad because a close friend moved away so I have lost an important relationship. I feel down because I did not get into medical school, that is, I lost the potential to help and save people or I lost the quality of life that the remuneration of being a doctor brings. If you haven't consulted the toolkit on Why Do We Have Emotions, now may be a good time to do so.

DEPRESSION VERSUS SADNESS AND THE BLUES

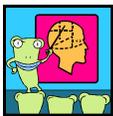
People frequently use depression to describe how they feel when they are sad and down. However, there is an important distinction between being depressed and feeling sad, blue or down. Depression is a state of extreme sadness and includes a number of behavioural, cognitive, emotional and physiological changes that interfere with your quality of life personally, interpersonally or at work. These changes include the ones in the figure below. We all feel down occasionally and eventually snap out of it. However, if you are experiencing many of the symptoms in the figure below for more than two weeks and you are having difficulty getting through the day, it is likely that you are depressed.



HOW TO TREAT DEPRESSION

Depression is possibly the most unpleasant emotion we can experience as humans. It robs us of feeling pleasure, of our energy and of our motivation to get better. It colours how we see the world. In fact when depressed, we see ourselves, our world and our future in a negative way.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR), up to 25% of the population will experience at least one major depressive episode in their life while up to 9% of the population can be diagnosed with the illness at any one specific moment. Fortunately, there is hope! Cognitive Behavioural Therapy has identified two main ways in which you can regain control over your life. These are: 1) getting active and; 2) changing your negative thinking. Although there is no simple way to get out of depression, people do get better and depression can end. But before we describe these, it is important to try to find out what triggered your depression.



For your information: The DSM-IV-TR (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision) is the manual used by mental health experts to diagnosis various disorders.

1. Find Your Trigger

Depression can be triggered by a number of factors including: real-life situations, negative thinking, lack of activity and engagement in pleasurable activities and physiological changes.

Some situations we experience can lead to depression. Such major life events include: divorce, financial difficulties, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job or a relationship, a lack of social support and isolation, stress at work and physical health problems of a loved one.

Some people develop negative beliefs about themselves, the world and their future, which has been called the 'Negative Triad'. These beliefs develop when we are young and into our adolescent years as a result of recurring negative experiences. Negative beliefs can be thoughts such as: I'm a loser, no good, worthless, incompetent or unlovable. Some people anticipate the future as being hopeless or believe that they exert little to no control over their lives. Others are excessively harsh and self-critical of themselves or others, while some people strive to be perfectionistic.

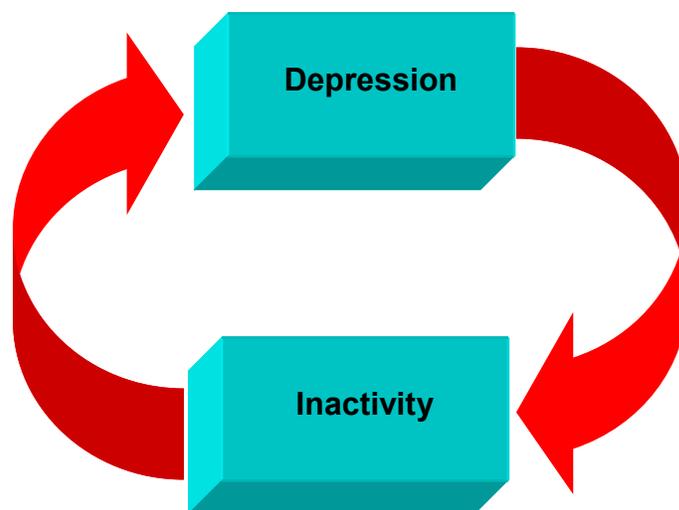
Some physiological changes can play a role in depression. Common examples include: low energy, some medications and a lack of sleep. Some studies have shown that people who are depressed have altered brain chemistry. Although it is currently not known whether these changes lead directly to depression or are a consequence of feeling depressed, a change in brain chemistry is related to depression.

A withdrawal from pleasurable activities or activities that provide us with feelings of pleasure and competence or mastery can lead to depression. Withdrawal from family or friends, poor self-care and reduced involvement in rewarding activities (e.g. sports, hobbies) are common examples.

Can you identify what has triggered your symptoms of depression? Is it one specific factor, or a combination of many?

2. Get Active!

When we feel down, most people become less active and stay indoors doing nothing. This is the worst thing you can do! By becoming less active you end up losing your normal energy levels. In addition, your body 'shuts down' and becomes metabolically less active, leading to a further loss of energy. Moreover, since your body has slowed down you become easily fatigued. Low energy and fatigue are two common symptoms of depression! In essence, inactivity leads to feeling depressed, which leads to further inactivity and more depression. Can you see the downward spiral?



Furthermore, by staying inactive, you lose the feelings of pleasure and mastery that you used to feel from engaging in personally-meaningful activities. Thus, your motivation decreases, which is another significant symptom of depression!

The cure or antidote is to get active! Engage in pleasurable activities even if you don't feel like it and no matter how hard it is to do so. The associated feelings of pleasure and motivation will return with time. Research studies have shown that getting active is one of the most important things you can do to fight depression. Getting active when you feel depressed is easier said than done. How can you get active when you have no energy, feel fatigued and have no motivation to do anything? Here are some tips that most people find useful:

- a. If you are unsure of what pleasurable activities to do, start with what worked in the past. Try to start off with 2 or 3 activities that gave you pleasure before or that made you feel a sense of accomplishment.
- b. If getting out of the house is too hard, then focus on doing things at home. For example, take a shower and get dressed, do a few chores or watch a movie.

- c. Every little bit of activity counts. Even a walk around the block or to the edge of your driveway is an important success!
- d. Research has shown that individuals who monitor and track changes achieve better and more consistent gains. Track how your mood changes before and after the activity. First, rate how much pleasure or mastery you think you will experience before the activity, and then after the activity is completed. Is there a difference? Did you experience more pleasure or a better sense of mastery than you thought before you began the activity?



For your information: 'Behavioural activation' is the technical term that psychologists use when people get active.

3. Change Your Negative Thinking

Are any of the negative beliefs identified above under the section Find Your Trigger contributing to your feelings of depression? Are there any other negative thoughts about yourself, the world or your future playing not mentioned above playing a role? If so, how can you change these thoughts or beliefs? Make sure to read the toolkit on Changing Your Negative Thinking to help you out.

4. Some Additional Strategies

As human beings, connecting with other people is important and is one of the best protective factors against negative emotions. Make sure to seek social support from friends and family or other resources. If none of these is possible, you could try going to a public place such as a café, mall or restaurant. Some people find being amongst people even though there is no direct contact soothing.

The majority of life is made up of the small things. If you only reward yourself occasionally with big things, a trip to a sunny location during your vacation for example, these moments will be rare and infrequent. So make sure to reward yourself with the small pleasures in life. These can include material things such as a book or piece of clothing. Some find food rewarding: an iced cappuccino, café latté or dinner in a restaurant. Or maybe social outings are what you prefer: a movie with friends or going to a sporting event. Whatever the case for you, make sure to identify what these small pleasures are and reward yourself on a daily basis!