

# Understanding depression

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**It's normal to feel a bit down or emotional now and then, especially when we're going through tough times. That's part of life.**

But depression is more than just a low mood; it can be a serious illness. (The medical name for this is *major depressive disorder*). People who have milder forms of depression will not be able to enjoy life as much, and the situation could get worse. There is a lot that can be done to improve things, no matter how bad it seems.

An episode of depression is serious if it lasts for at least two weeks - when the person feels miserable most of the day, nearly every day.

People with severe depression find it really hard to cope from day-to-day. Depression can have serious effects on *physical* and *mental* health.

The experience of depression is different for each person, but there are common symptoms.

## **A person may be depressed if they have:**

Felt sad, down or miserable most of the time, for more than two weeks...OR...lost interest or pleasure in most of their usual activities.

## **AND**

They've experienced symptoms in at least three of the following four categories in the column on the right hand side:

## **Symptoms of depression**

### **Behaviours**

- Not going out anymore
- Not getting things done (like work or study)
- Withdrawing from close family and friends
- Being grumpy and irritable
- Relying on alcohol and sedatives
- No longer doing things they enjoyed
- Crying a lot
- Unable to concentrate

### **Thoughts**

- 'I'm a failure'
- 'It's my fault'
- 'Nothing good ever happens to me'
- 'I'm worthless'
- 'Life's not worth living'

### **Feelings**

- Being overwhelmed, sad, empty, restless, frustrated, no confidence, indecisive, worthless, miserable.

### **Physical**

- Tired all the time, sick and run down, headaches and muscle pains, churning gut, sleep problems, loss or change of appetite, significant weight changes (losing or gaining weight).

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## How long does it last?

In most cases, severe episodes of depression will go on for weeks or months if left untreated. Depression is also highly likely to happen again if it isn't properly treated. That's why it's important to seek help.

## What makes a person more at risk of depression?

There's no clear-cut reason why a person may be depressed. And sometimes it literally comes out of the blue.

But some of the factors that can increase your risk are:

- Family conflict or violence
- Bullying or abuse
- The loss of someone close
- Stress, including loneliness, relationship problems
- Unemployment
- Drug and alcohol use
- Physical illness or long-term health problems
- Having a family member with depression
- Some women experience depression while pregnant or after childbirth, especially if they have any of the risk factors above.

## How common is depression?

It's very common. On average, one in five New Zealanders will experience a serious mood disorder (including depression) at some time in their life. It's more common among females (one in four females, compared to one in six males).

There has been an increase in the number of young people (15-18 year-olds) experiencing depression. Some studies estimate that 20-24% of young people will have experienced a significant depressive episode by the time they are 19.

## What can be done about depression?

Here's the good news - you can get through depression, and there is help out there.

Different types of depression require different types of treatments. For mild depression, self-help strategies (things like physical exercise) can be really helpful.

Take a look at *Fact Sheet 6: Helping yourself* for more information. For more severe levels of depression, medication and psychological therapies can help.

### To find out more:

If you want to chat about how you're feeling, or you've got any questions, you can;

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

**Email** The Lowdown team in the Chat section of [www.thelowdown.co.nz](http://www.thelowdown.co.nz). You can also ask them to give you a call back if you want to talk on the phone.

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