

## Understanding Depression

What is depression? The language we associate with it gives us a clue: black dog, dark cloak, black pit: we associate depression with darkness. It often feels as though a light has been switched off inside us.

Depression can have many symptoms: lack of energy, feeling weighed down by our problems, no enthusiasm or motivation for things, low mood or heaviness. Some of us are more prone to it than others. This may be just to do with the kind of person we are: we may tend towards a pessimistic view of the world, or to “look on the black side” of life, or there may be a history of depression in the family. Some people, by contrast, are more resilient and are able to shrug off depressive feelings. But even someone who appears to be resilient can be “worn down” by particularly difficult life events such as a major bereavement, loss of health or serious financial difficulties.

So what makes us depressed? Sometimes there are recognisable triggers: the loss of a loved one, losing one’s job, feeling weighed down by family responsibilities. Sometimes there are specific labels for the kind of depression we are experiencing, for example, post-natal depression or seasonal affective disorder (SAD). In some forms of depression there may be no obvious reason for it: we have no explanation for why we feel the way we do. With many kinds of depression, we are often put in touch with a core sense of feeling powerless: our experience tells us there is nothing we can do about our circumstances. This may also be reinforced by feelings of isolation: we have no one to talk to about our situation, we may feel desperate and hopeless. It’s hard for us to find our way out of what feels like a prison. We may feel closed off from ourselves and also from others.

What can we do to make ourselves feel better? This in itself may present a challenge, because when we are severely depressed it’s difficult to find the motivation to do anything. Perhaps the first step is to recognise that we are actually depressed (it’s not always obvious) and that we need help. A good place to find some help might be by visiting your GP. In the past, GPs would often prescribe anti-depressants, such as Prozac, as their main form of treatment for depression. This has changed in recent years and now many GPs employ trained counsellors in their practices to provide emotional support for their patients. Anti-depressants may still help you get through a difficult period, but by themselves probably won’t change any of the underlying symptoms.

Counselling offers an opportunity to talk about your depression with someone who is trained to listen and who can help you gain more understanding of your depression and may even help you get a handle on some of its underlying causes. For example, the depression may have crept up on you because, somewhere along the line, you have repressed negative feelings without realising it. Most counselling offered in GP surgeries is time limited, usually six sessions, but even over this time some progress can be made. Seeing a counsellor may also help us manage our depression better: it may not always be about eliminating it.

### Books:

“Overcoming Depression” Paul Gilbert; Robinson Publishing (2000)

### Websites:

[www.depressionalliance.org](http://www.depressionalliance.org)