

Factsheet 6

Depression and Work

Our work can be very beneficial to our mental wellbeing. It can provide us with a sense of purpose and achievement and can help us feel good about ourselves and boost our confidence. In fact, we know that being out of work for even a short period of time increases our risk of depression. However, work can be a cause of stress which, if not recognised and addressed, can lead to depression. Up to 1 in 4 people are affected by depression at some stage in their lives and for many, work is a contributing factor.

What is depression

We all feel down or fed-up at times but these feelings don't usually last and are a normal response to problems or difficulties in our lives. However, when they don't go away, are more than we can cope with and our ability to carry out our work and have satisfying personal relationships is affected, it may be depression. For a list of symptoms and more information on depression in general, see Factsheet 1.

What causes depression

- **Heredity:** being born to a parent or close relative who has had depression may increase our risk
- **Environment:** current factors like workplace stress, poor housing, money worries, relationship problems, physical illness, loneliness
- **Life events and experiences:** past issues like bereavement, abuse, bullying, job loss, relationship break-up
- **Personality:** people who have perfectionist tendencies or a more sensitive personality are more vulnerable to depression. It's not **what** happens to us but **how we deal with it** that matters.

Most people with depression probably normally have two

or more of these risk factors, and the more that apply the greater the risk. Sometimes there doesn't seem to be any reason.

What factors at work might increase my risk

- Being under pressure – although this can motivate us and help us to focus, when excessive pressure is the 'norm' and we don't take steps to counteract it, it can lead to stress, depression or anxiety
- Having a job that is very repetitive and doesn't give us enough challenge
- Organisational change
- Having a lot of responsibility without having enough control
- Little opportunity for physical activity which is vital for our mental health

How does depression affect us at work

If you have depression, you may notice some or all of the following changes in yourself:

- Lack of productivity
- Difficulty concentrating
- Inability to meet deadlines
- Poor timekeeping
- Taking time off work
- Being uncooperative or irritable with colleagues, or even having angry outbursts
- Loss of interest in your work or your colleagues
- Inability to say 'no', working longer hours, or taking on more and more even though you are already under pressure

How can I help myself at work

- **Maintain a healthy work/life balance.** Take time out for activities you enjoy. Spend time with people you are close to and do something that gives you a sense of achievement outside of work.
- **Keep active.** Do some form of regular physical activity. When this is difficult to fit in, park the

car further away from work, or get off at an earlier bus stop. Use your regular breaks to get up, stretch and move around

- **Talk to someone you trust.** Try to identify if it is work or personal issues that are contributing to your depression, or both. Talk to your employer about work-related issues. Adjustments may be able to be made that will help. Ask your GP's advice about taking time off and, if needed, take it. You could then discuss a 'phased return' approach with your employer for when you are coming back. This could get you back sooner. If you think being off will make you feel worse, ask about the possibility of reduced hours or lighter duties for awhile
- **Be realistic.** Don't expect yourself to be able to do everything or to do it perfectly. Be assertive and learn to say 'no'.

It is also important to eat regularly and healthily, even if you don't feel like it. Cut down on drinks containing caffeine as this can increase anxiety symptoms. Avoid alcohol or keep to safe limits. Get plenty of rest and maintain a good sleep routine.

How is depression treated

If you think you have depression, see your GP. If needed, he/she will help you decide on appropriate treatment.

Talking therapies (psychotherapies)

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) has been proven effective for mild/moderate depression. It works on the basis that if we change our unhelpful thinking patterns and behaviour it will improve how we feel. There are also many excellent self help books based on CBT. Other therapies and counselling are available too.

Medication

Anti-depressants are effective in treating moderate/severe depression. They are not addictive and have few side effects. However, speak to your GP if you have any concerns.

See our Factsheet 3 for more information on looking after your mental health. Take slow, small steps and choose activities that suit you. Don't forget to plan rest/relaxation periods too and remember most people with depression recover fully.



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