

Factsheet 7

Depression, Self-harm and Suicide

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 the illness, depression.

As many as 1 in 4 people experience depression at some stage in their lives. Recent studies have shown that between 8 -12% of the population (more than 150,000 people in Northern Ireland) are affected in any one year.

What causes depression

There is usually more than one cause or risk factor including life events/experiences, current circumstances, certain personality types and having family members with the illness (See Factsheet 1 on Depression).

Most people with depression probably 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.

Symptoms of depression

At least two of the following core symptoms for at least two weeks:

- an unusually sad mood that does not go away;
- loss of enjoyment and interest in activities that used to be enjoyable;
- tiredness and lack of energy

In addition, people who are depressed can have a range of other symptoms (See Factsheet 1 on Depression).

The number and severity of symptoms will determine whether the

depression is diagnosed as mild, moderate or severe.

Self-harm

Self-harm is the name given to any deliberate act of self-injury or behaviour intended to cause harm to one's own body. The most common form of self-harm is overdosing and the second most common is cutting. Other behaviours include burning, poisoning and alcohol/drug abuse. Some people affected by depression, or experiencing distress, may start self-harming to help them soothe unbearable emotional pain or to feel more in control of their lives. The danger with this is that, in time, the relief they experienced initially may diminish. This may lead them to increase the frequency or intensity of the self-harming behaviour, which may put their lives at risk e.g. by accidentally overdosing. In some cases self-harming behaviour may lead to suicidal behaviour.

People can and do stop self-harming as they learn to deal with problems and build other ways of coping into their lives (See Help for self-harm and suicide below). Self-harm is common so you are not alone even though it may feel like it. Over 170,000 people a year go to A&E departments for treatment after an act of self-harm and many more do not.

Suicide

It is not uncommon for someone who is depressed or experiencing emotional distress to experience thoughts of suicide. These can be very distressing but it is important to realise that this is just another symptom of depression and that they will pass when the depression is helped (See Factsheet 1 on Depression for information about help/treatment).

However, the suicidal

thoughts become dangerous for you if you start thinking about acting on your thoughts. If you are thinking this, your emotional pain and distress probably feels more than you can cope with. But you can survive suicidal thoughts when you find a way to reduce your pain and increase your coping resources, and you can. Many people who have felt as badly as you have got through this, and help and support is available for you.

Help for self-harm and suicide

There are organisations in the community who will help you deal with the problems in your life that have led to this. They will listen to you without judging you; they will see you, the person, not your behaviour. They can help you decide what help/support is right for you. (See Factsheet 11 on Useful Contacts)

Lifeline is a telephone help and counselling service for anyone in distress or despair. It is available 24/7 and is free from mobile phones.

Trained counsellors, experienced in issues such as depression, self-harm and suicide will listen to you and give you confidential help and support.

They can give you immediate support, offer you a face-to face appointment, or signpost you to other services in your area.

Call Lifeline on 0808 808 8000.

Talk to your GP, or the doctor who is most understanding of mental health problems, at

your GP practice. Make an appointment as soon as possible and tell him/her exactly how you are feeling.

What if I am feeling suicidal now

Keep yourself safe – talk to someone!

- Call Lifeline on 0808 808 8000
- Talk to a friend or family member
- Go to somewhere you'll feel safe, be with other people
- See your doctor
- Call the out-of-hours GP service
- Go to the A&E department
- Call emergency services on 999

Avoid/stop using alcohol or drugs

While they may seem to help at the time, they will make your problems worse

Tell yourself that

- Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem
- You've coped so far and you can get through the next...(day, week, hour)
- These are the thoughts of depression/despair and you don't have to act on them

Ask yourself

- What helped you to feel better in the past?
- What can I do right now that will help me feel better?

Don't try to deal with this alone; suicidal thoughts are difficult enough without 'going it alone'. There are a lot of people who want to listen to you and to help you. Remember, the vast majority of people with depression recover completely. You will look back and be glad that you chose to live!

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 in emotional distress or despair recover completely.



Project supported by the PHA

For details about our other services, publications and fact sheets, or for general information about our charity, visit our website: www.aware-ni.org.uk or call our helpline on 08451 20 29 61