

MODULE 3C

Activity #4 Handout

Group #4: Depression (Fact Sheet)

What is Depression?

The word “depression” is often used to describe the feelings of sadness or unhappiness which all of us experience at some point in our lives. It is also a term used to describe a type of mental illness called Clinical Depression or just Depression.

Because Depression is so common, it is important to understand the difference between unhappiness or sadness in daily life and the symptoms of clinical depression.

When faced with significantly high stress (such as the loss of a loved one, relationship breakdown or great disappointment), most people will feel unhappy or sad. These are emotional reactions which are appropriate to the situation and will usually last only a limited time. These reactions are not a Depression, but are a part of everyday life.

The term Depression describes not just one illness, but a group of illnesses characterized by excessive or long-term depressed mood which negatively affects the person’s life. Depression is often accompanied by feelings of anxiety. Whatever the symptoms and causes of Depression, there are many therapeutic interventions which are effective.

To help differentiate the symptom of “depression” from the mental disorder “Depression” we capitalize the “D” when we mean the illness.

“Baby Blues” and Postpartum Depression

The so-called “baby blues” affect about half of all new mothers. They feel mildly depressed, anxious, tense or unwell, and may have difficulty sleeping even though they feel tired most of the time. These feelings may last only hours or a few days, then disappear. Professional help is not usually needed. This is not Depression.

However, in up to ten percent of mothers this feeling of sadness develops into a serious disorder called Postpartum Depression. Mothers with this illness find it increasingly difficult to cope with the demands of everyday life.

They can experience anxiety, fear, despondency and severe sadness. Some mothers may have panic attacks or become tense and irritable. There may be a change in appetite and sleep patterns. Because of these symptoms they may have difficulties in their daily lives, including trouble in caring for their child.

A severe, but rare form of Postpartum Depression is called Puerperal Psychosis. The mother is unable to cope with her everyday life and is disturbed in her thinking and behaviour. Professional help is needed for both Postpartum Depression and Puerperal Psychosis. This form of Depression may be genetic and can run in families.

Major Depressive Disorder

This is the most common form of Depression. It can come on without apparent cause, although in some cases a severely distressing event might trigger the condition.

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The cause is not well understood but is believed to be associated with a changes in brain circuits that control mood. Genetic predisposition is common.

A Depression can develop in people who have coped well with life, who are good at their work, and who are happy in family and social relationships.

For no apparent reason, they can become low-spirited, lose their enjoyment of life and suffer from disturbed sleep patterns. People experiencing Depression have severe negative emotions, negative thoughts plus behavioural and physical symptoms.

Sometimes feelings of hopelessness and despair can lead to thoughts of suicide. Suicide is a tragic outcome of Depression in some people.

The most serious form of this type of Depression is called Psychotic Depression. During this illness, the person loses touch with reality, may stop eating and drinking and may hear voices (called hallucinations) saying they are wicked, or worthless or deserve to be punished.

Others develop false beliefs (delusions) that they have committed bad deeds in the past and deserve to be punished, or falsely believe that they have a terminal illness such as cancer (despite there being no medical evidence).

A Depression is a serious illness which present risks to the person's life and well-being. Professional assessment and treatment is always necessary and, in severe cases, hospitalization may be required.

Bipolar Mood Disorder

A person with Bipolar Mood Disorder experiences Depression with periods of Mania which involve extreme happiness, over-activity, rapid speech, a lack of inhibition and in more serious instances, psychotic symptoms including hearing voices and delusions of grandeur.

Sometimes only periods of Mania occur without depressive episodes, but this is rare. More information about this mood disorder is found in the section called "What is Bipolar Mood Disorder?"

What Causes Depression?

Depression is caused by a combination of environmental and genetic factors. Depression "runs" in families but most people who have a family member with Depression do not develop the illness.

Depression may also begin after personal tragedies or disasters. It is more common at certain stages of life (such as at childbirth). It may also occur with some physical illnesses. However, Depression often causes life stresses which may be incorrectly considered to be causes of Depression.

How Can Depression be Treated?

People experiencing Depression should contact their family doctor or community health centre. Treatments for Depression can help the person return to more normal feelings and to enjoy life. The approach depends on each person's symptoms and circumstances, but will generally take one or more of the following forms:

- Psychological interventions that can help individuals understand their thoughts, behaviours and interpersonal relationships. These treatments often take 8-12 weeks to achieve positive effects.

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- Antidepressant medications relieve depressed feelings, restore normal sleep patterns and appetite, and reduce anxiety. Antidepressant medications are not addictive. In young people, they can take 8-10 weeks to achieve their positive effects.
- General supportive counseling assists people in sorting out practical problems and conflicts, and helps them understand how to cope with their Depression.
- Lifestyle changes such as vigorous physical exercise may help people who suffer from Depression.
- For some severe forms of Depression, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is a safe and effective treatment. It may be lifesaving for people who are psychotic, at high risk of suicide, or who, because of the severity of their illness, have stopped eating or drinking and may die as a result.

For more information on Depression, check out:

www.teenmentalhealth.org/product/tmh-speaks-depression/

Group #4: Understanding Depression (Reporting Page)

What is Depression?

How common is Depression?

Describe some of the symptoms of Depression:

List and briefly describe some of the main types of Depression:

What type of treatment is available for people experiencing Depression?

What other kinds of support can help a person with Depression recover?