Understanding Depression

What is Depression?

Depression is essentially a lowering of mood. This can range from a mild and temporary drop in mood to a more persistent and serious drop in mood that can even be life threatening due to accompanying thoughts of self harm or suicide. In its clinical form, depression can be unbearable and cause serious and severe disruption to a person's life and require psychological and/or medical treatment. Fortunately, both psychological and medical treatments for clinical depression have been shown to be very effective in reducing depression and increasing well being.

What are the symptoms?

Depression is more than a low mood, there are a range of symptoms that can be part of the experience of depression that are physical, cognitive, psychological and behavioural. Symptoms include:

- Feeling sad or tearful
- Difficulty sleeping (insomnia) or the desire to sleep all the time
- Extreme fatigue
- Loss of pleasure in life
- A sense of hopelessness
- Loss of interest and motivation
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Feeling anxious or worried
- Loss of appetite and weight loss
- Increase in eating and weight gain
- Loss of sexual interest
- Physical aches and pains
- Impaired thinking and concentration
- Withdrawal from social relationships
- Difficulty communicating with others

Why People become Depressed

Depression can be a response to a distressing situation like loss or stress (reactive depression). In the face of persistent stress, depression is a common outcome. Going through major changes in life, feeling pressured or feeling that you don't have enough resources to cope with the demands of life can all lead to depression. Feeling sad for a time after a bereavement or major change is natural and normal, but when depression persists beyond what you might expect of yourself or beyond what is considered “normal” within your context, then depression may have reached an unhealthy level.

Depression is also associated with low self esteem, which may have developed over years of painful life experiences and criticism from others and oneself. Loss of belief in oneself or pessimistic thinking are significant contributors to the development of depression.
Depression can also be part of an illness like bipolar disorder in which the person experiences extreme moods without any reason—very high and very-excited or very low and depressed. Depression can also be unrelated to any outside cause and is referred to as endogenous depression.

There are many theories about why someone might begin to experience the symptoms of depression without a discernable trigger and while there is good evidence that a chemical imbalance of certain neurotransmitters (chemicals that carry messages from cell to cell in the brain) is associated with depression, there seems to be great variance from individual to individual due to differences in temperament, personality and life circumstances. It seems that all these factors interact in the development of depression.

If you are experiencing depression and it is interfering in your ability to live a satisfying life or to keep up with the demands of life, then it may be time to seek professional assistance. Your GP is a great place to start in seeking help.

How do you know if you have depression?

If any of the above is sounding familiar to you, then you may be experiencing depression. The best gauge to use in determining whether you have a problematic level of depression is to ask yourself what has changed in your life since you started feeling depressed. Has the quality of your life dropped? If you are unhappy for the majority of the time, if you are unable to keep up with all your usual tasks and lifestyle demands, if you are finding yourself avoiding others and spending time on your own dwelling on sad or negative thoughts when you used to be more social, if you are feeling overwhelmed at all, if you are thinking about harming yourself, then depression has become a problem for you. When depression interferes in your life to this degree, then it is most certainly time to talk to someone. This might be a friend or family member to start with, but if things don’t really change for you, then a professional might be the best person to assist you. This might be your GP and/or a psychologist or counsellor. If in doubt, then it is best to seek professional assistance. Many people who experience depression have experienced great improvement when they sought professional assistance rather than trying to struggle along on their own.

What can you do about depression?

There are many choices in dealing with depression:

- You might start with making changes to your lifestyle, reducing stress, increasing your optimism and reducing pessimistic attitudes, encouraging yourself to engage in more pleasurable activities even when you don’t feel like it.
- Get connected to your community, reach out to others. Research tells us that the happiest people are those who are active, have a sense of belonging to their community, who feel passionate about what they do, who enjoy their environment. Think about joining a club or social group, joining a gym or bushwalking club or picking up a hobby that you have always been interested in but never got around to doing.
- Talk to someone. Talking about problems and feelings can go a long way toward alleviating depression. This might be a friend/family member or a GP, psychologist, psychiatrist or counsellor.
- Consider having an assessment with a GP on whether medication might help. Anti-depressant medications assist the brain to restore its usual chemical balance and help reduce the symptoms of depression. You need not be on medication forever, but taking medication for a period of time can help to elevate your mood and improve your coping to allow you to make other positive changes in your life that will have a lasting effect on your well being.

Assistance in this area and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. The RMIT Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

The RMIT Counselling Service can be contacted at 9925-4365 between 9am and 5pm.