

Sadness and depression

Is it normal?

Have you ever felt sad most of the time for a few weeks? Or lost interest in things that you previously enjoyed? Sadness is a normal emotion that comes and goes. It may be triggered by losses in life such as a friend moving away, or it may be triggered simply by our exposure to certain stimuli such as sad movies and music. Usually people start to feel brighter in their mood again after some time.

However depression is a more persistent and pervasive condition that can affect not only mood, but a range of other symptoms.



Symptoms of depression includes:

- Loss of energy
- Loss of motivation
- Loss of interest or enjoyment in activities.
- Changes in sleep, appetite, and weight.
- Reduced concentration and memory.
- Low self-esteem
- Sense of hopelessness

If you have been feeling sad for more than two weeks, or also have some of the symptoms above, it is recommended to speak to a professional.

Ways to start feeling better

Behavioural activation: becoming more active, one step at a time

Depression is often associated with a reduced interest in activities and low motivation, which means that people who are feeling depressed generally do less. They may withdraw from others, get less work done, and initiate activities less often. Unfortunately the tendency to do less when one is depressed will result in a lower mood, and a

downward spiral can develop into a pattern of doing less, feeling worse, and then doing less.

For example, imagine Sophie has started experiencing depressed mood after having an argument with a work colleague. On the weekend she may struggle to find the motivation to complete her essay for class, and then feel guilty that she has not done her work. Feeling down, she may decide she is not in the mood to go out with her friends on Saturday night. She stays home and spends a lot of time thinking about how bad her week has been. She then feels more depressed, and this pattern continues during the week.

Behavioural activation is an evidence-based strategy designed to help break that negative downward spiral. The idea is to very gradually introduce activities into your day over time.

In the example of Sophie above, it is clearly not helpful to withdraw and engage in fewer activities, even if that is what she feels like doing. Using behavioural activation, Sophie initiates some activities that seem manageable to her. She may not be able to face a dinner with a big group of friends, but she can manage the idea of a coffee with her cousin. She may not be able to start writing her essay, but she can start by going to the library to get a few resources.

Sadness and depression

When people are feeling depressed, they may not enjoy activities that they used to enjoy. It is important to engage in activities first, and the enjoyment will come later. If you wait for your motivation levels to build, you may be waiting too long. Making such changes can be easier said than done and it is often helpful to seek professional support.

Thought challenging: creating new perspectives when things go wrong

Many people who are depressed think in negative ways. These negative thinking patterns can exacerbate the way that we feel when bad things happen. For example, when Jason's best mate doesn't come out with him on his birthday, he will naturally feel disappointed about this, and perhaps sad. However, if he then starts thinking "my friends don't care and never do anything for me", then Jason will probably feel a lot worse.

In some instances, there may not be any evidence that your negative expectation or belief is actually true. Challenging negative thinking is one way to reduce depressed mood. It is another evidence-based strategy which is effective in the treatment of depression. For example Jason may consider the following points when he assesses whether his negative belief that his friends don't care about him is true:

Evidence that my belief "my friends don't care and never do anything for me", is true

- My best friend missed my birthday
- He also didn't call to see if I needed help when I was going through a rough time last month.
- My other friends were busy last week and weren't able to hang out.

Evidence that my belief is false

- My friend did miss my birthday but that is unlike him. There may be an explanation for why he didn't make it.
- Some of my friends do care and made an effort to see me more and take me out when I had problems last month.
- I have always had a friend come to help me when I have moved house a few times.

This list of evidence for and against Jason's belief is expanded until he has exhausted all of the evidence on each side. The last step of completing thought challenging is to then develop a more positive thought that is realistic and more balanced. For example, Jason may decide to believe "My friend let me down by not turning up on my birthday, but I had other friends there and I know that overall they do care even if they can't be there for me 100% of the time."

Thought challenging is a skill that needs to be developed. For more information, we recommend the following:

Beyond Blue video clip

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7yFsySn-QQ

Centre for Clinical Interventions resources

www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/infopax.cfm?Info_ID=37

Wanting to work on this further?

This resource is designed to help people understand depression and engage in strategies to boost mood. Of course, a brief information sheet may not be sufficient to treat symptoms of depression.

When people are feeling down and depressed, it is often helpful to seek professional support. See our website for more information on how to make an appointment to see a counsellor and where else to get help.

Looking for more information on depression?

Beyond Blue: www.beyondblue.org.au/

Black Dog Institute: www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/

Crisis information and feeling suicidal

If you experience suicidal thoughts, it is very important that you speak to a mental health professional, such as a psychologist or your GP. The numbers below are for 24-hour assistance:

Mental Health Emergency Response Line: 1300 555 788

Life Line: 13 11 14

Samaritans: 1800 198 313

Suicide Call Back: 1300 659 467

Or see the following websites:

Suicide call back service. For information on suicide prevention, advice on helping someone who is suicidal or for telephone and online counselling.
www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

Lifeline. For information about Lifeline and crisis support chat: www.lifeline.org.au

Where are we?

The main Counselling centre is at the South Street Campus on Bush Court. We also have some counselling available at Peel.

Email for all campuses:

counsellingservice@murdoch.edu.au

South Street Campus

Social Sciences Building 440 (Bush Court)

Phone: (08) 9360 1227

Hours: 8.30am – 4.30pm

Peel Campus Student Centre

Phone: (08) 9582 5501

Hours: 8.30am – 4.30pm

www.murdoch.edu.au/Counselling