

# DEPRESSION



Multiple Sclerosis Society  
of SA & NT

Around 50% of people with MS are diagnosed with depression. One in four people with MS probably has unrecognised and undiagnosed symptoms of depression. The stigma associated with mental health problems may act as a barrier to discussion about the condition and seeking treatment.

The single most important factor in determining the quality of life of people with MS is not disability or fatigue or work, but the presence or absence of depression. This has been supported by a US study showing that depression was the best predictor of quality of life for people with MS.

Researchers have looked at depression in MS and compared it with the incidence of depression in other chronic diseases. They found that depression is a specific feature of MS. That is, while having MS can cause one to get depressed, there is something very specific about the disease process in MS which makes people with MS more likely to get

depressed.

So, avoiding depression takes on a much more important role in the management of this illness than is generally recognised. There is an important role here for lifestyle therapies ie diet, exercise, counselling and keeping a diary in preventing depression, and there is also evidence that low vitamin D levels are likely to precipitate or exacerbate depression and poor cognitive function. This is another reason to regularly check vitamin D levels. These lifestyle therapies can be effective in preventing depression, as well as generally staying well.

In contrast to what common sense might suggest people with MS who are severely disabled are not necessarily likely to be more depressed. This may be due to the fact that some people in general are resilient and have a remarkable ability to adapt to adverse circumstances.

### **What is depression?**

Depression is more than just a low mood – it is a serious illness that has serious effects on mental and physical health. People with depression find it hard to function every day. For more information read Beyond Blue's information sheet '*Understanding depression*'.

### **What causes depression?**

The causes of depression are not fully understood, but an imbalance in brain chemistry is thought to be a factor in developing depression. For more information read Beyond Blue's fact sheet number 3 '*What causes depression?*'

For people with MS the challenges of living with an unpredictable and potentially debilitating long term condition can be a trigger for depression. Chronic pain, overwhelming fatigue, spasticity and social isolation can all contribute to depression.

In some cases depression is not triggered by MS symptoms, but is actually due to MS itself as the presence of lesions in particular areas of the brain can directly affect mood and cause depression.

### **How is depression diagnosed?**

A GP usually diagnoses depression. While familiarity with the symptoms of depression can help other health professionals identify the condition, you can help in early diagnosis and treatment by talking with your GP or health professional about any changes in mood you experience.

### **Role of family and friends**

Family and friends can play an important role in diagnosis and management. People may not always see changes in their mood and behaviour until other people point them out. Being receptive to any changes in mood or behaviour and encouraging people to talk to their GP is an important way of supporting someone who has depression.

### **Symptoms of depression**

The symptoms of depression are many and varied and not everyone experiences all the symptoms which are usually grouped into psychological, physical and social symptoms. For more information read Beyond Blue's '*Depression symptoms checklist*'.

## **Impact of depression**

Depression goes further than just the symptoms. It can affect your personal, social and professional life. Without professional help the condition is likely to spiral out of control – so it is important to seek help from your GP as early as possible. A depressed individual's withdrawal from intimate and social relationships can be seen by others as rejection or disinterest. Friends, carers and relatives do not always recognise it as such and this lack of understanding can result in a lack of empathy and sensitivity towards the individual.

Depression can affect work performance – and if work colleagues are unaware of the condition can see the individual as lazy or incompetent.

Depression can result in a lack of self care and feelings of low self esteem whereby people may stop taking medication and following a healthy lifestyle resulting in a further worsening of MS symptoms.

## **Depression and MS medication**

Depression can be a side effect of medication for MS such as steroids which can cause

hyperactivity that ends in a low when treatment ends. Interferon medications carry a warning about depression as a side effect in susceptible individuals and research has yet to settle this debate about the interplay between interferons and depression. Modafinil which is sometimes used to treat fatigue can cause anxiety or depression. Baclofen, used to treat spasticity can cause unpleasant hallucinogenic symptoms, agitation or altered moods if treatment is stopped suddenly rather than phased out over several weeks.

## **Treatment**

The approach to treatment of depression is similar to that for a physical injury. In other words, time is needed for the healing process – the mind and your emotional wellbeing need time to be restored to wellness.

There are a range of different treatments for depression that are recommended depending on the severity of the depression, your preferences and past history.

Treatments generally fall into the categories of psychological treatments like cognitive

behavioural therapy or interpersonal therapy and/or medications.

Comprehensive information about treatments is on the Beyond Blue website under treatments.

[http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link\\_id=7.980](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link_id=7.980).

Whatever treatment is appropriate,

a good relationship with your therapist is essential. This might mean that you need to shop around for the right therapist until you find one with whom you can have a comfortable relationship. Not every qualified therapist is right for everyone.

### **If you are interested in more information**

The Society has more information sheets included in the Symptoms Series as well as a Managing MS and a Healthy Living series.

Please see the website for more details.

### **References**

#### **Beyond Blue**

*Beyond Blue* produces a comprehensive set of resources including fact sheets, booklets and audio and multilingual resources on treatment, medication and recovery techniques. A starting point would be the following:

Understanding depression fact sheet

Depression symptom checklist

A guide to what works for depression

Recovery fact sheet

Healthy eating for people with depression, anxiety and related disorders

[http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link\\_id=7.980](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link_id=7.980)

A series for young people is on Beyond Blue's Youth website

<http://www.youthbeyondblue.com/factsheets-and-info/>

#### **MS Society Australia**

<http://www.msaustralia.org.au/symptoms-depression.asp>

#### **MS Society of Canada**

Living well with MS Mind Matters <http://mssociety.ca/en/pdf/mindMatters.pdf>

Taming stress in MS <http://mssociety.ca/en/pdf/TamingStress.pdf>

MS and your emotions <http://mssociety.ca/en/pdf/emotions.pdf>

## **MS Trust**

Depression fact sheet <http://www.mstrust.org.uk/downloads/depression.pdf>

## **MS Society (UK)**

MS Essentials 10 Mood, Depression and emotions

[http://www.mssociety.org.uk/support\\_and\\_services/free\\_publications/ms\\_essentials\\_10.html](http://www.mssociety.org.uk/support_and_services/free_publications/ms_essentials_10.html)

MS Essentials 28 Living with the effects of MS

[http://www.mssociety.org.uk/support\\_and\\_services/free\\_publications/es28.html](http://www.mssociety.org.uk/support_and_services/free_publications/es28.html)

## **National MS Society US**

Depression and MS <http://www.nationalmssociety.org/about-multiple-sclerosis/what-we-know-about-ms/symptoms/depression/index.aspx>

Depression and MS Managing specific issues

<http://www.nationalmssociety.org/multimedia-library/brochures/managing-specific-issues/index.aspx>

## **MS Society (Ireland)**

What everyone should know about depression [http://ms-society.ie/uploads/File/depressionbooklet\\_nov04.pdf](http://ms-society.ie/uploads/File/depressionbooklet_nov04.pdf)

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