

Diabetes blues

When you feel a sadness that just won't go away, it's time to get help, writes **Elaine Newell**

Feeling down once in a while is normal but some people feel a sadness that just won't go away. Life seems hopeless. Feeling this way most of the day for two weeks or more is a sign of serious depression. Depression presents itself in many different ways: anxiety, sleeplessness, lack of appetite, and difficulty concentrating are very common. The encouraging news is that it can be successfully treated.

What is depression?

Even though it is treatable, depression is an illness that is not fully understood. What is known is that when a person is depressed, there are changes in the way the brain works. Certain chemicals in the brain may not be working properly. If this is the cause of the depression drug treatment can be effective in helping to correct the problem, along with various forms of counselling. In addition, depressed people have higher than normal levels of a stress hormone.

So how can you tell the difference between feeling miserable and actually having a depressive illness? The first step is to discuss the situation with your GP if you are having difficulty coping. Your doctor can assess whether you need more help, or can reassure you that what you might be feeling will pass.

What causes depression?

Life throws up many different situations that can make us feel bad and we will all go through periods of sadness or grief.

DIABETES-TRAINED COUNSELLORS

- Being diagnosed with diabetes can be scary but specially trained counsellors can ease the burden.
- Counsellors are trained professionals who can work with you to help you understand the cause of your problems and guide you through the process of learning how to make good life decisions.
- A list of diabetes-accredited counsellors is available on the Federation's website www.diabetes.ie. As this is a private service, those availing of it must pay a fee which is set by a counsellor.

Your doctor will look for certain factors that may point to a diagnosis of depression. These include anxiety, feeling sad, lack of energy, fatigue, disturbed sleep and lack of interest in life. Depression is an under diagnosed and undertreated illness. It is believed that only 50% of people with depression symptoms seek help.

Anyone can develop depression. It is estimated that one in 10 Irish people will have depression at some point in their lives. People who have had an episode of depression are at risk of having another in the future.

Depression is often preceded by difficult life events: bereavement, relationship or financial problems, difficulties at work, diagnosis of a chronic condition or having an illness. People react differently to loss or problems, but sometimes this reaction can be disabling.

Does diabetes cause depression?

The stress of being diagnosed with a chronic condition, dealing with the daily management, never having a 'day off' from diabetes and feeling restricted in what you can eat and drink, can make you feel alone or set apart from your friends and family who don't have diabetes.

If you face diabetes complications such as nerve damage or if you are having trou-

ble keeping your blood sugar levels within range, you may feel like you're finding it difficult to control your diabetes and this can make you feel frustrated and sad.

For people with diabetes, depression can develop as a result of the lifestyle adjustments they have to make to control their diabetes. Managing diabetes can be stressful and time consuming and the dietary restrictions can make life seem less enjoyable.

If you are depressed and have no energy, you may feel less motivated to eat healthily and take regular physical activity. Whether or not you have diabetes, there is not just one cause of depression.

How to recognise depression?

One useful way to help recognise depression is to use a system called FESTIVAL. This is a list of common symptoms. If five or more of these symptoms are present for more than two weeks, it is likely that a depressive episode is occurring. The symptoms are as follows:

- **Feeling:** depressed, sad, anxious or bored.
- **Energy:** tiredness, fatigue, everything seems an effort, slowed movements.
- **Sleep:** Waking during the night or too early in the morning. Oversleeping or trouble getting to sleep.

BACK TO BASICS

- **Thinking:** slow thinking, poor concentration, forgetful or indecisive.
- **Interest:** loss of interest in food, work, sex and life generally.
- **Value:** reduced sense of self-worth, low self-esteem or guilt.
- **Aches:** headaches, chest or other pains or palpitations without a physical basis.
- **Live:** not wanting to live or suicidal thoughts.

Treatments available for depression

The outlook for people with depression who seek treatment is very promising. By working with your doctor, you can regain control of your life.

The first step in getting help for depression is recognising that you may have a problem and discussing your symptoms with your GP. This is not necessarily as easy as it sounds. Depression can be stigmatised negatively and people can feel that they will not be understood and feel alone. Accepting the help of others can be a major hurdle to overcome. There are several options available: psychotherapy including counselling, antidepressant medication, ECT and healthy eating with regular physical activity.

Psychotherapy including counselling

These have been found to be very effective in people with mild to moderate depression. Advice and support is an important part of helping all people with depression, no matter how mild or severe their symptoms may be. Certain therapies such as cognitive behaviour therapy and interpersonal therapy can be effective, either on their own or used in combination with drug treatment in more severe cases.

Prescription medications

There are several types of prescription antidepressant medications that are divided into different classes. Each antidepressant class affects the levels of chemicals in the brain called neurotransmitters, which are thought to be involved in regulating mood. Ideally, antidepressant treatment should be combined with counselling.

The choice of medication is tailored to the individual. It is important to work closely with your doctor in devising a treatment plan and to have regular reviews to assess how effective the medication is proving, whether there have been any side-effects and how severe these are.

How do antidepressants work?

It is believed that depression is linked to an imbalance of chemicals within the brain. Different antidepressants have been designed to deal with these imbalances but they do so in slightly different ways.

Within the brain there are a number of chemical messengers. These are called neurotransmitters. Key neurotransmitters are serotonin and noradrenaline. When these behave normally, mood is regulated. However, if these neurotransmitters are not moving freely as they should, depression occurs. In different ways, antidepressants act on the brain to keep these neurotransmitters working properly.

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)

ECT involves applying an electric shock to the brain to treat a mood or other disorder. This is done via electrodes placed on the head. ECT is effective in people who have severe depression.

There has been no full scientific explanation of how ECT actually works. However, current thinking is that it helps to produce neurotransmitters and acts in a similar way to a course of antidepressants. There can be side-effects from ECT. These include temporary memory loss and confusion, headaches and stiffness. There is concern about its longer term effects and this is one reason why ECT remains controversial.

Healthy living

These are some suggestions which may help provide some relief from depression symptoms:

- Try to get regular sleep and not become over tired
- Eat a well-balanced diet
- Do regular physical activity
- Try to take up a hobby or activity that you can do regularly

- Spend time with family and friends
- Set realistic goals for yourself
- Create small and manageable tasks

Getting help

Depression is an illness that is very common in Ireland but very treatable. If you are feeling symptoms of depression, don't keep them to yourself. First, talk them over with your doctor and a close family or friend.

AWARE

Aware is a voluntary organisation that provides support for people with depression. Attending an Aware Support Group offers the opportunity for those with depression to interact with other people in a similar situation.

At meetings, people can talk openly in a mutually caring environment about how they feel to those who really understand depression. The process of the support group is to allow people to give and receive support and improves their coping skills and problem solving by sharing their feelings and experiences.

The caring and supportive nature of the group helps people to find the courage and confidence to identify mood changes in their earlier stages and to take the steps necessary to stop the illness disrupting their life.

Aware also has a helpline (1890 303 302) where it provides a listening service for people affected by depression, either personally or through family and friends.

The Helpline offers a non-judgemental ear to people who may be distressed or worried, or just need someone to talk to. You can also call the helpline if you are worried about someone who may be depressed or for information about depression or Aware's services.

The Helpline is open seven days a week from 10am-10pm. From Thursday to Sunday, the Helpline also operates after 10pm. The website address is: www.aware.ie.

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