WHAT?

It is very common to feel depressed as anyone may at times experience disappointment, frustration, losing someone or something important. These are normal and temporary reactions to life’s stresses.

However, when a person experiences a prolonged period in a depressed mood, whether following a particular event or for no apparent reason, he/she may be suffering from clinical depression – an illness that needs effective treatment.

TYPES

A depression can affect the way you think and the way you feel, both physically and emotionally, Depressive disorders come in different forms.

Major depression
There is a combination of symptoms for people who are suffering from major depression. It consist of a severe and persistent depressed mood that lasts for at least two weeks and cause significant distress which interfere with daily functioning. These disabling episodes can occur once, twice or several times in a lifetime. Often, these symptoms affect our work, interests and feelings towards family and friends.

Dysthymia
Dysthymia is a milder form of depression. A person suffering from dysthymia has long-term, chronic depressive symptoms that usually continue for a period of two years. The symptoms include changes in energy, appetite or sleep as well as loss of self-esteem and feelings of hopelessness. They cause distress and difficulty in functioning but are not as severe as in major depression. People who suffer from dysthymia are at increased risk for episodes of major depression.

Sources: http://www.cgh.com.sg
CAUSES

Genetic factors
Some types of depression run in families. Major depressive disorder is often associated with having too little or too much of certain chemicals in the brain.

Stressful events
Life events such as death of a loved one, divorce, loss of a job, retirement or even moving to a new home are contributing factors to depression. It is also quite normal to feel depressed after a distressing event. However, we “work through” our feelings about what has happened and come to terms with them.

Lack of social support
Stressful circumstances such as loneliness, social isolation, and physical disability also play a part. For example, some international students may suffer from depression because they do not have adequate support from family and friends who are far away.

Physical illnesses
Depression is also commonly accompanied by physical illnesses, especially life-threatening diseases such as cancer, heart disease, chronic pain and painful diseases such as arthritis, bronchitis or stroke.

Personality
Personality may also play a part in depression. Some people are more vulnerable than others because of our individual make-up or previous life experiences.

Adolescents
It may be quite common for teenagers to feel depressed because of the maturation process, with the influence of hormones and independence conflicts with parents. It may also be a reaction to a disturbing event such as the death of a loved one, boy-girl relationship issues or failure in school. Individuals with low self-esteem who feel that they have little sense of control over negative events are particularly at risk of being depressed when they experience stressful events.

SYMPTOMS

1. Persistent sadness or low mood that continues for more than two weeks
2. Loss of interest and enjoyment in daily activities
3. Lack of drive and motivation
4. Extreme fatigue
5. Difficulty in concentrating or making decisions
6. Agitation, restlessness and irritability
7. Loss or gain in appetite with loss or gain in weight
8. Insomnia or excessive sleeping
9. Loss of outward affection and interest in sex
10. Loss of self confidence
11. Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, inadequacy, helplessness and hopelessness
12. Recurrent suicidal thoughts.

TREATMENT

Psychotherapy
Psychotherapy involves talking things through with a counselor or psychotherapist. The act of talking to a therapist can bring tremendous relief.

Antidepressants
Antidepressants are necessary for severe or prolonged depression. Depressants work slowly (1-2 weeks) but are effective in helping people with clinical depression. You can eat a normal diet (if not, your doctor will tell you) and they are compatible with painkillers, antibiotics and oral contraceptive pills. You should avoid alcohol as it will interfere with the effect of depression.

However, antidepressants may cause mild and usually temporary side effects in some people. If the side effects are unusual or interfere with your daily functioning, do not hesitate to report it to your doctor. The most common side effects and their remedies are:
1. Dry mouth – drink more water.
2. Constipation – eat bran cereals, prunes, fruit and vegetables.
3. Dizziness – rise from bed or chair slowly.
4. Drowsiness – Temporary, do not drive or operate heavy equipment if feeling drowsy.
5. Headache – this will usually go away.
6. Nausea & Stomach discomfort – even when it occurs, it is transient after each dose; take medicine with food.
7. Nervousness and insomnia – these may occur during the first few weeks; dosage reductions or time will usually resolve them.

SELF HELP

Don’t bottle things up
Talk to people close to you about your feelings. It helps to re-live the painful experience several times, to have a good cry and talk things through. This is part of the mind’s natural healing mechanism.

Breaking up tasks
Do not set difficult goals. Break large tasks into small ones, set some priorities and do what you can.

Do something to occupy your mind
Get out of the house for some exercise! While you may not feel able to work, it is always good to try to keep up some light activities such as housework. This will help you take your mind off those painful feelings.

Balanced diet
Eat good, balanced meals regularly even though you may not feel like eating.

Avoid alcohol abuse
Resist the temptation to drown your sorrows with alcohol. Even though alcohol can give you instantaneous relief, it is actually a depressant. Prolonged alcohol use may be bad for your physical health.

Don’t worry too much about insomnia
Don’t be unduly upset about not sleeping. Listen to the radio or watch TV. Resting your body will still help, even if you are not actually asleep. If necessary, the doctor may also prescribe some sedatives until your mood improves.

Give yourself some time
Remind yourself that depression is something that other people have gone through, and that you will eventually come out of it.

HELP FROM OTHERS

The most important thing anyone can do for the depressed person is to help him or her get appropriate treatment. Encourage them to stay with the treatment or to seek different treatment if no improvements occur, and help monitor if the depressed person is taking medication. Emotional support is also very important. Spend time with them and encourage them to talk and to keep going. Constant reassurance is invaluable as depressed people lack confidence and are prone to worries and doubts. If the depressed person is getting worse and is starting to have suicidal thoughts, take these statements seriously and report them to their therapist.