



LIFE MENTAL HEALTH

DEPRESSION & ANXIETY INFORMATION GUIDE

Depression & Anxiety – Information Guide

- What is depression?
- Signs of depression
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- What is anxiety?
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DEPRESSION

Many South Africans of all races, sexes and cultures can suffer from depression and anxiety. So if you are one of those people, you are not alone and is available.

Did you know that most people who are depressed don't get treatment?

One in 10 people will have depression in their life, but most people do not get the help they need, even though treatment can help. People often don't seek help because:

- depression is often not seen as a real illness;
- many people blame themselves and think they are weak; and
- people are scared or too embarrassed to ask for help.

What is depression?

Depression is an illness, which involves your body, mood and thoughts. It affects the way you eat and sleep, the way you feel about yourself, and the way you think about things and the world. Depression is not the same as everyday blues, grief or sadness that we all sometimes feel. It is not a sign of weakness, and it cannot be wished away. People with depression cannot just *pull themselves together* and get better. Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months or years.

Types of depression

A person with **major depression** feels very sad and down most of the time. This affects their work, sleeping, how much or little they eat, and how little they now enjoy things they used to enjoy like sports, TV, music, church and community events. (See symptom list)

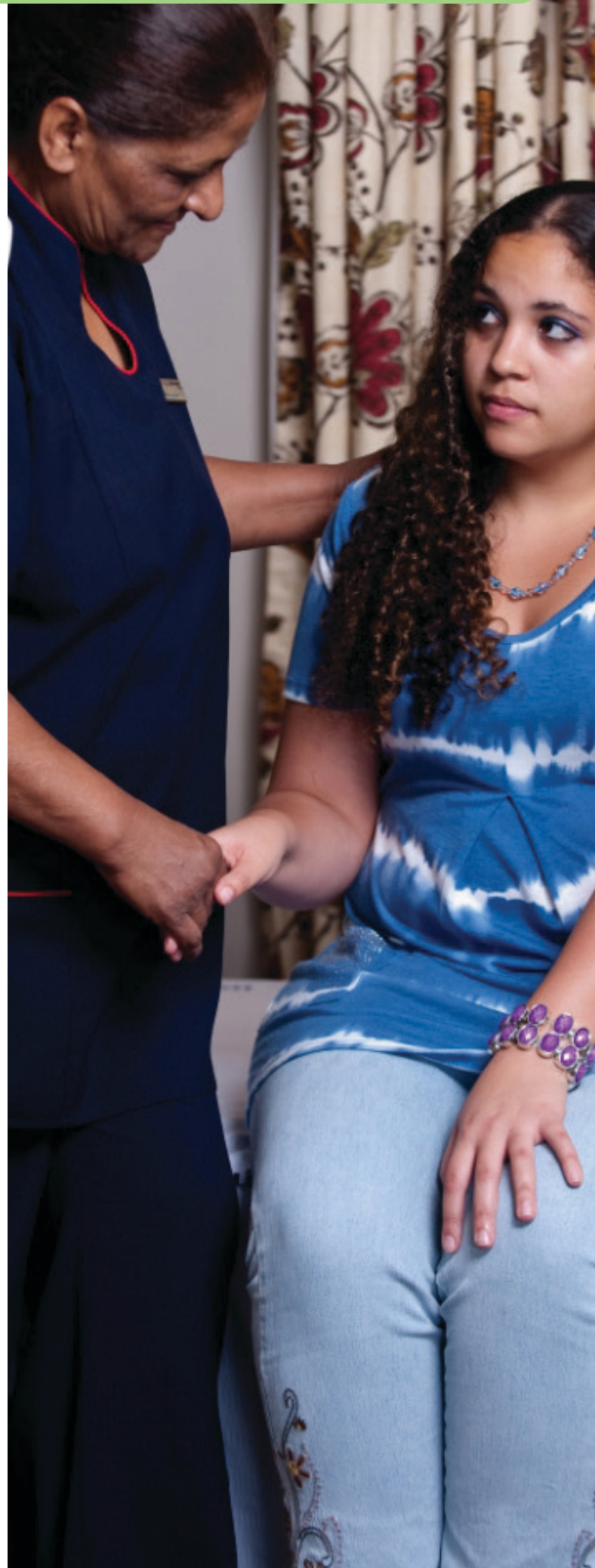
When their down mood is swapped with very high or overly excited or manic feelings and behaviour, this is called **bipolar mood disorder** (which used to be called manic depression).

Symptoms

Not everyone who is depressed or who has bipolar mood disorder will have every symptom. Some people may have only a few symptoms, whereas others will have many.

Depression symptoms:

- feeling sad or feeling “empty” most of the time;
- feeling anxious or hopeless about life;
- feeling guilty, or feeling helpless;
- thoughts of death or suicide, suicide attempts, fear of dying;
- restlessness, irritability, or anger;
- difficulty concentrating, remembering things or making decisions;
- loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed;



- having less energy than usual, tired all the time, feeling *slowed down*;
- losing weight by not eating or gaining weight by over eating;
- early-morning awakening, or oversleeping; or
- physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, stomach pain, back or chest pain, even if they have been checked by a doctor.

Bipolar mood disorder symptoms:

- excited or fast thinking and talking;
- feeling irritable or angry all of the time;
- feelings of power, greatness, or more importance than other people you know;
- thinking very fast and talking so fast that others cannot understand you;
- foolish spending of money you don't have;
- delusions, believing things that are not true may happen;
- extreme cases of hearing or seeing things that aren't there;
- reckless behaviour with no thought of what will happen;
- unsafe sexual activity;
- abuse of alcohol or drugs; or
- little need for sleep

Please see the *bipolar mood disorders* leaflet for additional information.

Causes of depression

Depression has many possible causes and is often brought on by a combination of many different factors. Sometimes a specific event may lead to depression; other times depression comes on for no apparent reason that you can see – even for people whose lives are going well. Some possible reasons include:

- **External events:** the break-up of a relationship, a traumatic event, financial worries, loneliness, legal problems, retirement, and grief can all result in depression.
- **Family history:** Having close family who have had depression sometimes means you are more likely to have depression as well.

Depression is also believed to be caused by an imbalance of brain chemicals. Medical illness, including strokes, HIV and AIDS, TB and other health problems, can also cause depression. Some medications like treatment for high blood pressure, birth control pills, and steroids may also increase your risk.

Treatments

Depression is one of the most treatable mental illnesses and eight out of ten people heal completely. You will need to have a complete medical check up to make sure there are no other medical causes for how you are feeling.

Antidepressants

Eight out of ten people with depression will make a good recovery on antidepressants. If one medicine does not work for you, your treating doctor might prescribe another one which can be more efficacious. Antidepressants do not work quickly – for most people it takes two to three weeks to start feeling better. It is very important to continue taking your medication as prescribed so that it may take full effect. You may experience mild side-effects like a dry mouth, headache, or dizziness but these usually pass within a week or two. Never mix medications without consulting your doctor first. Always tell your doctor if you are pregnant or have any other illness – like HIV and AIDS. Call your doctor or speak to a pharmacist if you have a question about your medicine.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy (or talk therapy) with a psychologist, social worker, or counsellor may assist in developing the necessary skills and coping mechanisms to deal with depression.

Support groups

Support groups are a very good way to get assistance and advice from people who know how you feel because they have felt the same way. Support groups are run by mental healthcare users for other mental healthcare users as a safe place where you can share experiences. Call SADAG 0800 12 13 14 for contacts in your area or speak to the Life Mental Health unit closest to you (please see the back of the brochure for more information).

Self help

Self help can help you cope better. Here are some actions you can take:

- Understand what depression is – the more you know, the better you will cope.
- Do things to keep yourself busy – it can be of great help if your mind is occupied by an interest or hobby, or by reading a book or watching a TV programme or film.
- Avoid substances like tobacco, drugs and alcohol.
- Try to be with other people and to talk about how you feel; it is usually better than being alone and secretive. See people, do things that may make you feel better: like going to a movie, watching a sports match, or having tea with a friend.
- Let your family and friends help you. Don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it. Expect your mood to improve slowly. Feeling better takes time.
- Remember: depression is not part of you, it is caused by symptoms. These symptoms cause you to feel, think and act differently to normal. Once you actively treat these symptoms you will start to feel better.

ANXIETY

We all know what it feels like to be nervous and anxious – the butterflies in your stomach feeling before a date, the tension when your boss is angry, and the way your heart beats fast and hard when you get a fright or are in danger. Anxiety can help us cope but for people with an anxiety disorder, this emotion can be disabling if it is there all the time.

Panic disorder

Panic attacks involve short periods of terrifying fear, along with many physical symptoms: your heart may pound, you may feel dizzy, sick, out of breath and scared. Your fingers or legs may tingle or you may experience pain in your chest.

Please see the *anxiety disorders* leaflet for additional information.

Panic attacks can happen often and unexpectedly when there is no reason to be fearful. Most people with panic disorder feel scared about having another panic attack and avoid places in which they believe these attacks are likely to occur again. Treatment can help most people who have this illness. It is very important for the person who suffers from a panic disorder to get information about the problem, and the type of treatments available.

Who suffers from panic disorder?

The disorder typically begins in young adulthood, but older people and children can be affected too. Women are affected by it, twice as often as men. The disorder can also be hereditary.



Symptoms

In the beginning, the first panic attack may seemingly come out of the blue while a person is doing some everyday activity like driving, sitting at work, or shopping. Suddenly, the person feels very frightened and terrified. This usually lasts only a few minutes, but may feel longer. The symptoms take about an hour or so to disappear. People who have had a panic attack feel like they have been hit by some terrible illness or feel that they are going crazy. Often people who are having a panic attack go to a hospital for help, suspecting it is a heart attack. The first panic attacks may occur when a person is under a lot of pressure e.g. having stress at work, writing exams, the death of a family member or close friend. The attacks may also occur following surgery, a serious accident, illness or childbirth. Too much caffeine and the use of drugs or some medication can also cause panic attacks.

Panic attack symptoms:

- sense of being very scared, frightened or terrorised;
- rapid and audible heartbeat;
- difficulty breathing and or chest pains;
- dizziness, light-headedness, feeling sick;
- tingling or no feeling in the hands;
- hot flushes or shivering;
- sense of not feeling normal, fear of losing control, going crazy or doing something embarrassing; or a fear of dying.

Coping with panic attacks

- Remember that although your feelings and symptoms are very frightening, they are not dangerous or harmful. Understand that what you are feeling is only a very strong feeling of your body's normal behaviour to stress.
- Do not fight your feelings or try to wish it away.

- The more you are willing to deal with it, the less frightening it will become.
- Focus your concentration on the present, where you are and who you are with. Seek help from a professional and read about your illness.
- Focus on, and carry out simple tasks. Talk to a friend on the phone, go for a walk, talk to a neighbour or office colleague, concentrate on counting backwards from 100 in twos or snapping a rubber band on your wrist to bring you back to the present.

Getting help

For more information about Life Mental Health's facilities and service offerings please contact 011 219 9620, email to mentalhealth.headoffice@lifehealthcare.co.za or visit our website at www.lifehealthcare.co.za.

Alternatively you can contact the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG):

0800 12 13 14
 0800 70 80 90
 0800 56 75 67
 011 234 4837
www.sadag.co.za

SADAG has an extensive list of psychologists, psychiatrists and support groups nationally and Life Mental Health would like to thank them for the contents of this brochure.

