

# Depression and Coronary Heart Disease



## FACT SHEET 18



Information from the Heart Foundation in association with *beyondblue*

Following a major review of the evidence<sup>1</sup>, the Heart Foundation now considers depression to be a significant risk factor for coronary heart disease. The National Heart Foundation of Australia and *beyondblue: the national depression initiative* have joined forces to raise awareness of the risks and impact of depression in people with coronary heart disease.

Depression is an illness that can affect anyone at any time. However, research shows that:

- Depression is more common among people with coronary heart disease.
- Depression can increase the risk of further heart problems in people with coronary heart disease.
- Depression is a risk factor for coronary heart disease.
- Depression is under-recognised and under-treated.
- Depression can be treated effectively.

### WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

- Depression is not just a low mood or feeling sad, but an **illness**.
- People with depression generally feel sad, down or miserable most of the time. They find it **hard to do normal activities** and **function from day to day**.
- Depression has serious effects on physical as well as mental health.
- Depression is a common illness which affects up to one million Australians each year.

### HOW DO I KNOW IF A PERSON IS DEPRESSED (AND NOT JUST SAD)?

A person may be depressed, if **for more than two weeks** they have:

1. Felt sad, down or miserable most of the time, OR
2. Lost interest or pleasure in most of their usual activities.

**AND** experienced symptoms in **at least three** of the following four categories:

#### 1) Behaviours

- Stopped going out
- Not getting things done at work
- Withdrawn from close family and friends
- Relying on alcohol and sedatives
- No longer doing things they enjoyed
- Unable to concentrate

#### 2) Thoughts

- "I'm a failure"
- "It's all my fault"
- "Nothing good ever happens to me"
- "I'm worthless"
- "Life is not worth living"

#### 3) Feelings

- Overwhelmed
- Guilty
- Irritable
- Frustrated, angry
- No confidence
- Unhappy
- Indecisive
- Disappointed
- Miserable
- Sad, tearful

#### 4) Physical

- Tired all the time
- Sick and run down
- Headaches and muscle pains
- Churning gut
- Sleep problems
- Poor appetite/weight loss

**Typically, depression will go on for weeks or months if left untreated.**

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### WHAT ARE THE TREATMENTS FOR DEPRESSION?

For people with depression and heart disease, cardiac rehabilitation programs and regular light/moderate physical activity have been shown to be effective for the less severe types of depression. However, more severe types of depression require different types of treatment and it is important to know that when treating depression, there are effective psychological or pharmaceutical treatments.

#### Psychological treatments

Psychological treatments look at issues that particularly affect people with depression, such as changing negative patterns of thinking or sorting out relationship difficulties:

- Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) – to correct the negative ways we think
- Interpersonal therapy (IPT) – to improve relationships.

#### Medications

Pharmaceutical treatments are effective for treating depression. People who are depressed often feel physically unwell. Antidepressant medication treatments relieve the symptoms of depression (such as insomnia). It is common to worry about the potential side effects of antidepressant medication. However, untreated depression can lead to further negative effects on physical health.

**The most important thing is to find a treatment that works.**

Many things that people try, do not treat the cause of the illness. For example, sleeping tablets or simple counselling are ineffective (even though they may provide temporary relief).

**There is a range of treatments that are proven to work – it's about finding a treatment that's right for you.**

### WHAT CAN YOU DO?

People with depression don't usually get better on their own. They need the help and support of their family and friends.

#### You can help someone by:

- Encouraging them to talk about the issues and problems causing distress
- Suggesting they go to a doctor or other health professional
- Assisting them to make an appointment
- Going with them to see a doctor or other health professional
- Following them up after the appointment
- Encouraging or getting them involved in social activities.

#### It would be unhelpful to:

- Put pressure on them by telling them to 'snap out of it' and 'get your act together'
- Stay away or avoid them
- Tell them they just need to be busy or get out more
- Pressure them to party more or wipe out how they are feeling with drugs and/or alcohol.

If you or someone you know needs help, talk to your doctor or another health professional about getting the RIGHT help. Remember, depression is treatable.

**More fact sheets on a range of depression-related topics can be obtained by calling Lifeline's Just Ask on 1300 13 11 14 or printed from the *beyondblue* website: [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)**

**More information on a range of heart health topics can be obtained by calling Heartline on 1300 36 27 87 or printed from the National Heart Foundation of Australia website: [www.heartfoundation.com.au](http://www.heartfoundation.com.au)**



**Heart Foundation**

**This information sheet was jointly developed by the National Heart Foundation of Australia and *beyondblue: the national depression initiative.***

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<sup>1</sup> Bunker, SJ et al., 'Stress' and coronary heart disease: psychosocial risk factors. *Med J Aust* 2003; 178 (6): 272-276.