UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION: AN INTRODUCTION

DID YOU KNOW?

According to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group, about 20% of the population will be affected by a depressive disorder at some point in their lives.[4]

Depression is more than 'feeling down'

Depression is a medical condition that causes feelings of sadness and emptiness, affecting your mind, body and behaviour.[1,2,3] It's normal to feel sad from time to time, but depression is much deeper and more complicated than sadness.[1] When you are depressed, you will experience a continual low mood that eventually becomes overwhelming and starts interfering with your everyday life.[1,2,3]

Depression often starts in the teens, 20s or 30s, but it can happen at any age.[1] You might experience a period of depression multiple times during your life or only once.[1] While it is a serious condition, there are also many effective ways to treat it.[1] Your doctor will explain the types of treatment that might work best for you.

What does depression feel like?

Depression can affect your mind and body in many different ways.[1,2,3]

Mind:[1,2,3]

- Often feeling sad, tearful or hopeless
- Losing interest or enjoyment in everyday activities and hobbies
- Becoming withdrawn, losing interest in socialising and sex
- Feeling more easily irritated and frustrated
- Struggling to concentrate and make decisions
- Feeling guilty or worthless
- Thinking about death or suicide

Body:

- feeling exhausted, having no energy and struggling to get even small tasks done[1,2,3]
- physical aches and pains, headaches and digestive troubles for no obvious reason[5]
- losing your appetite or craving certain foods more[1,2,3]
- struggling to fall asleep, or wanting to sleep all the time[1,2,3]

Different types of depression

The word ‘depression’ is often used as an overall term to describe a number of different depressive disorders.[5] The most common of these are:[5]

- Major depressive disorder: A depressed mood and loss of interest in everyday activities; also called clinical depression or simply depression
- Persistent depressive disorder: A depressed mood lasting for at least 2 years; also called dysthymia
- Postpartum depression: Severe depression affecting a woman during pregnancy and/or after delivery. Intense feelings of sadness, anxiety and exhaustion
- Seasonal affective disorder (SAD): A depressed mood every year during the winter months when there is less natural sunlight, usually lifting during spring and summer
- Psychotic depression: A combination of severe depression with some type of psychosis, such as upsetting delusions or hallucinations



Bipolar disorder

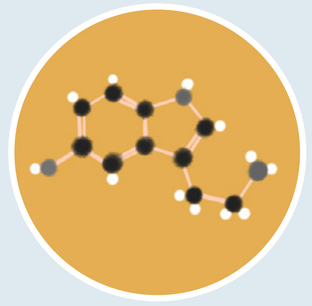
Bipolar disorder is different from depression, but it does include periods of extremely low moods with the same symptoms as major depression.[5] (People with bipolar disorder also experience periods of extremely elevated or euphoric moods.)[5]

Depression is an illness, not a weakness!

It’s a chemical condition

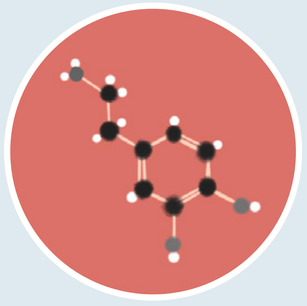
If you want to make a healthy, tasty loaf of bread, you need all the right ingredients to come together in a unique way to make the recipe work. A healthy brain is the same; it needs the right chemicals in the right amounts to function properly. The nerve cells in your brain use special chemical ‘ingredients’ to send messages to each other.[8] These chemicals are called neurotransmitters.[8] Each type of neurotransmitter carries a different kind of message and plays a special role in your brain chemistry.[8]

For example, here are 3 important neurotransmitters that can affect the way you feel and act:[8]



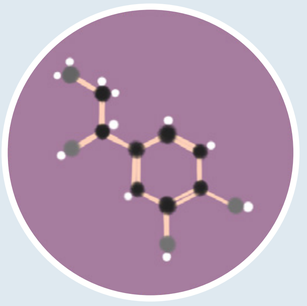
Serotonin

- Moods,
- Sleeping patterns
- Appetite



Dopamine

- Pleasure
- Satisfaction
- Reward
- Attention
- Learning



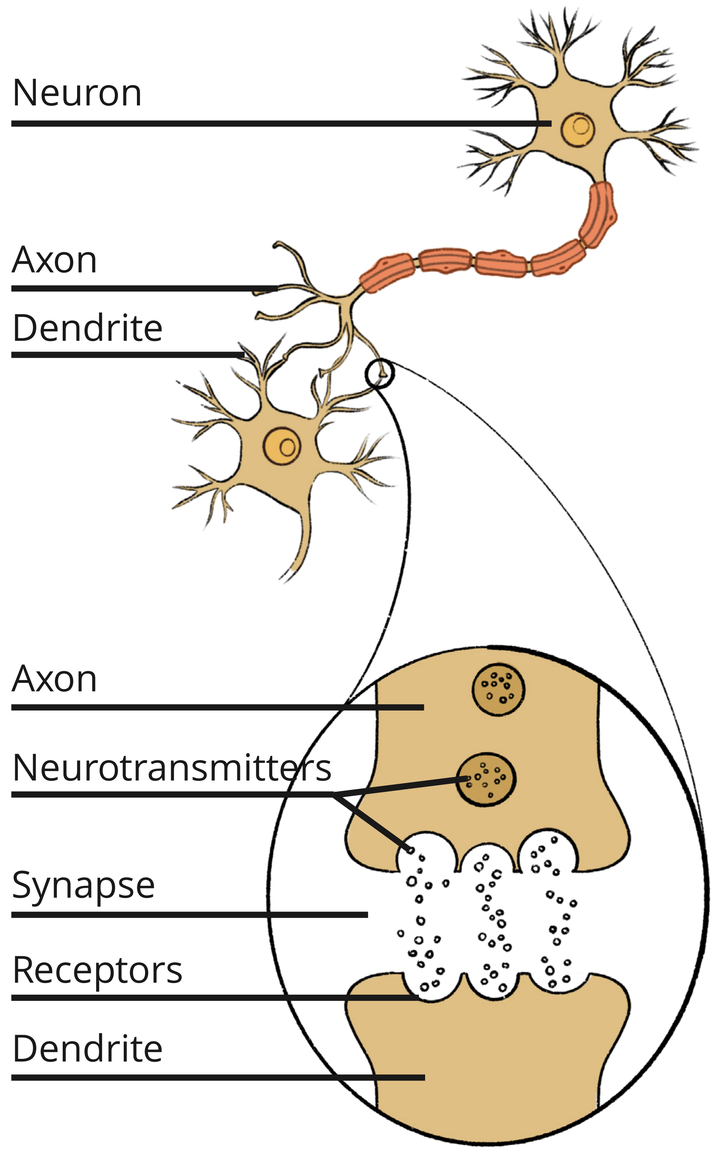
Norepinephrine

- Attention,
- ‘Fight or flight’ response

Communication between 2 neurons

When 2 brain cells (neurons) want to communicate, this is what happens:[8]

- The neurotransmitters are packaged up and released from the end (axon) of the first cell.
- The package travels across the space (synapse) between the first cell and the next.
- Receptors on the next cell, called dendrites, receive the communication.
- Different types of dendrites receive different types of neurotransmitter molecules.
- If any extra molecules are left over in the synapse, the first cell gathers them back up and reprocesses them to use in another message.



Research suggests that lower-than-normal levels of neurotransmitters can cause depressed moods and behaviour.[8] Imagine trying to make your loaf of bread without enough yeast. Yeast communicates with the other ingredients to help the bread rise. When you don't have enough yeast, the bread will struggle to rise and will end up flat and hard.In the same way, without enough of the right neurotransmitters sending the right messages, your brain will struggle and you'll start to feel depressed. Like any other disease, depression is a real medical problem.[1] It's not a sign of weakness, and you can't just 'cheer up and snap out of it'.[1] But don't be discouraged; with proper medical treatment, you can recover!



Did you know?

Depression can look and feel different for different people, and a depressed person could be really struggling inside while still appearing 'happy' on the surface.[6] You might be surprised to know that famous comedians like Jim Carrey, Ellen DeGeneres and even South Africa's own Trevor Noah – some of the funniest and most successful people in the world – have experienced depression.[6,7]

Causes

Some forms of depression, like postpartum depression and seasonal affective disorder (SAD), start because of specific circumstances,[5] but we often don't know what causes depression.[1] A wide variety of factors can trigger depression or make some people more vulnerable to experiencing depression than others.[1] These include:[1]

- Brain chemistry imbalances
- Hormonal changes or imbalances
- Traumatic or stressful life events, like bereavement or abuse
- A family history of depression and other mental illnesses
- Serious or chronic physical illness

- A personal history of other mental illnesses, like anxiety disorder, eating disorders or posttraumatic stress disorder
- Current or previous use of alcohol or drugs
- Side effects of certain prescription or over-the-counter medications

Did you know?

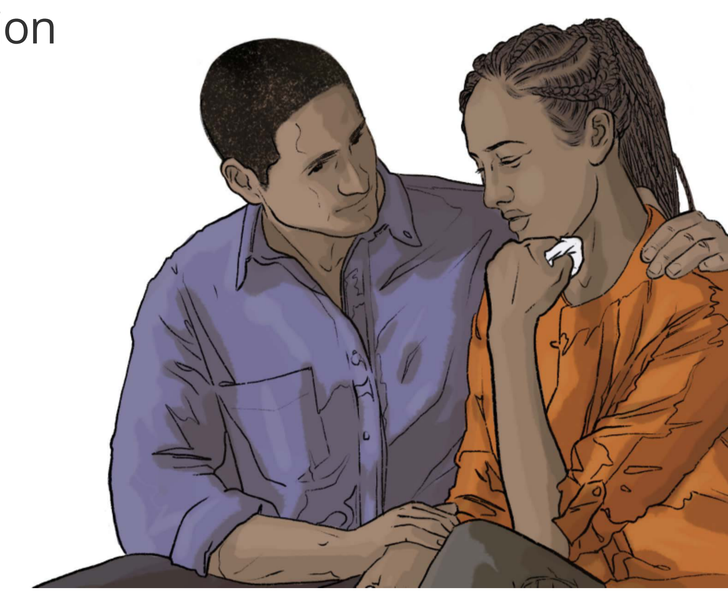
More women than men are diagnosed with depression, but this is partly because women are more likely to seek treatment.[1] Research also shows that the LGBTQI+ population has a higher rate of depression.[9]

Diagnosis and treatment

Before diagnosing you with depression, your doctor will consider your symptoms and how long they have been troubling you, as well as your personal risk factors.[5] If you've been experiencing 4 to 5 common symptoms of depression for a period of at least [2] weeks, your doctor may diagnose you with major depressive order or clinical depression.[10] If you've experienced a few episodes of severe depression along with episodes of milder symptoms over a period of 2 years, you may be diagnosed with persistent depressive disorder.[10]

Other types of depressive disorders can be diagnosed depending on the specific circumstances affecting your life.[10] With the right treatment, you can learn to manage your depression or even make a complete recovery.[4] Your doctor's suggested treatment will depend on what type of depression you have and how severe it is.[10]

- **Therapy:** There are several types of therapeutic treatments that can help you to better understand and manage your depression.[2] These include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), bereavement counselling and group therapy.[2]
- **Medication:** Your doctor may also prescribe a course of antidepressant medication to help relieve your symptoms.[2]



Important:

Be aware that a new medication might take a few days or weeks to start making a difference.[2]
It's like adding yeast to your bread, and it could take a bit of time to find the right type and the right amount you need to get the 'recipe' just right.Some antidepressants can make you feel worse in the first weeks of treatment, before they make you feel better.[11] It's very important to keep in touch with your doctor while you are adjusting to a new medication or therapy programme.

Caring for yourself during a depressive episode

Depression is best managed with therapy and medication, but there are also many ways you can look after yourself and prevent your feelings from becoming overwhelming.[4] Here are a few things you can do to help yourself cope:[12]

- Set up a regular daily routine that you can follow easily.
- Get out of bed and get dressed every day, even if you do nothing else.
- Break big tasks or chores down into smaller ones that feel easier to manage.

- Eat regular, balanced meals. If you don't have much appetite, eat small healthy snacks throughout the day.
- Get regular exercise, like a daily walk or playing sport.
- Go to bed at the same time every night, and get up at the same time every morning. This will help to regulate your mood and your sleeping patterns.
- Keep a daily journal and write down your feelings; it can help you to keep track of your moods and help put things in perspective.
- Share your thoughts and feelings with someone you trust.
- Avoid drinking alcohol or using recreational/illegal drugs. They can interfere with your medication or make your depression worse.
- Try to avoid making any big life decisions until you feel less depressed.
- Try doing a relaxing hobby you usually enjoy when you aren't feeling depressed.
- Join a support group or get involved in a community volunteer programme.

Most importantly, be patient with yourself. You are worthy of support, understanding and kindness!

Reach out: Useful resources and further reading

- The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG)
- WHO: I had a black dog, his name was Depression
- LGBT Well-being: Psychological Health Services OUT.org.za
- South African Suicide Hotlines

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