



Information Sheet

Intellectual disability and depression

What is major depression?

The word “depression is used in many different ways. People feel sad or blue when bad things happen. However, everyday ‘blues’ or sadness is not a depressive disorder. All of us can experience ‘the blues’ at some time but can usually continue to function in our everyday lives and soon recover without treatment.

Major depressive disorder is a type of mood disorder that lasts for at least two weeks and affects a person’s ability to carry out their work and usual daily activities and to have satisfying personal relationships. Between ten and fifteen per cent of people will experience a major depression at some point in their lives.

Depression often co-occurs with anxiety disorders and substance use disorders.

Depression and grief

It is important not to confuse depression with grief. Grief is a normal response to loss. The length of time someone grieves and the way in which they do so is very individual. Unresolved grief and multiples losses over time may increase the risk of someone becoming depressed. People with intellectual disability experience grief and loss. It is important to remember that they may express their grief differently than the general population and their grieving may take longer and take a different path.

Depression and intellectual disability

Depression is the most common mental disorder experienced by people with intellectual disability, however, it can often be overlooked. Communication difficulties may make it harder for the person to describe their feelings and fears.

There are characteristic signs and symptoms of depression. People differ in the number of symptoms they have and also how severe the symptoms are and how persistent the symptoms remain. For someone with intellectual disability there may be gradual or sudden changes in behaviour patterns and/or presentation.

Recognising major depression

Major depression affects people in a variety of different ways and symptoms may occur in numerous combinations. Common symptoms include:

- ▶ Loss of interest in activities that were previously enjoyed
- ▶ Eating too much or too little, resulting in unplanned weight changes
- ▶ Feeling sad, anxious or agitated
- ▶ No 'get up and go', lack of energy, withdrawn with low motivation

- ▶ Feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness or guilt
- ▶ Loss of confidence, avoiding other people
- ▶ Changes in usual sleeping patterns
- ▶ Moving/talking slowly or rapidly with increased or decreased energy
- ▶ Being snappy, upset, tantrums, unusual aggression
- ▶ Concentration problems, unable to complete usual tasks without extra support
- ▶ Depressed and/or irritable mood and/or lack of emotional reactivity
- ▶ Preoccupation with deaths/funerals and suicidal comments

People with intellectual disability can sometimes display other symptoms:

- ▶ Sudden or gradual changes in usual behaviour patterns
- ▶ Seeking more reassurance
- ▶ Loss of previously mastered skills
- ▶ Incontinence and/or constipation
- ▶ Increased irritability with outbursts of anger, destructiveness or self-harm
- ▶ Complaining of aches and pains
- ▶ Sad appearance, tearful and withdrawal
- ▶ Changes in appetite.

What causes major depression?

Some of the causes can include:

- ▶ A sudden loss, including the death of a relative, friend or pet, the departure of a favourite carer, or changes in housing or work
- ▶ Genetic susceptibility: history of depression in close family members
- ▶ An imbalance of chemicals in the brain that affect a person's mood
- ▶ Physical health problems such as hypothyroidism, glandular fever, hepatitis
- ▶ Various medications
- ▶ Past or present physical, emotional or sexual abuses
- ▶ Communication difficulties
- ▶ Lack of exposure to sunlight during the darker winter months
- ▶ Poor social, coping and problem-solving skills
- ▶ Living in conflict and poverty.

Getting help

The first step is awareness and the time to get professional help is when the behaviour changes. Speak to the person's GP, service coordinator, a mental health professional, psychiatrist, psychologist or counsellor.

For people with intellectual disability it may initially be useful to have a familiar person go to an appointment with them as family or carers will be able to provide some support and describe the changes they have noticed.

Data collection is a great help in the assessment, treatment and prevention of further episodes. This sets in place an objective behaviour observation system that can highlight patterns of behaviour changes over time.

With early diagnosis and treatment, symptoms can be reduced or eliminated, and the long-term outlook is good. Some treatment options involve a combination of support, psychological approaches and medication.

Psychological approaches include:

- ▶ **Cognitive behaviour therapy:** The person is helped to recognise patterns of thinking (cognition) and acting (behaviour) that are making them more likely to have problems or are keeping them from improving once they become unwell. Once these patterns are recognised, the person can make changes to replace these patterns with new ones that reduce symptoms and improve coping.
- ▶ **Counselling:** Assists people explore problems and resolve difficulties such as conflict and deal with grief or relationship issues. Counselling may involve the use of charts, pictures, photos, drawings and diaries to help describe feelings and worries and to try out alternative solutions.
- ▶ **Medication:** Can be used to help the brain restore its chemical balance and alleviate symptoms. Where possible, medication should be used in conjunction with other interventions. Medications may take two to four weeks before the effects are seen and must be regularly reviewed by a GP or psychiatrist.
- ▶ **Changing lifestyle and environmental factors** that may contribute to depression such as loneliness, lack of meaningful activities, increased stress at home or at work. Aim for a stable, secure and safe environment.
- ▶ **Maintaining a normal routine** wherever possible, to ensure a sense of consistency, safety and support.
- ▶ **Psycho-education:** educating the person, family and support staff about depression, its effects and how best to manage it.

Other helpful resources

Disability Services—Centre for Disability Health

Call: 8397 8100

SA Health Mental Health Triage Service

Call: 13 14 65 (statewide) 24 hours, seven days a week. This service provides advice in emergencies and is the main point of access into mental health services.

Beyondblue

Beyondblue is a national, independent, not-for-profit organisation working to address issues associated with depression, anxiety and related disorders in Australia.

www.beyondblue.org.au or call 1300 22 4636

SANE Australia

SANE conducts programs, educational campaigns and research to improve the lives of people living with mental illness, their family and friends. SANE also operates a helpline and website. Online helpline and information available at:

www.sane.org or freecall 1800 18 7263* (*mobile phone calls incur a charge)

Books Beyond Words

A series of picture books produced by the Royal College of Psychiatrists (UK) to make communicating easier with people who have difficulty with the written word and to enable discussion about difficult topics. Supporting text and guidelines are also provided for carers, supporters and professionals.

- ▶ *Ron's Feeling Blue* (depression from a man's point of view) available at: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/publications/booksbeyondwords/bbw/9781908020086.aspx
- ▶ *Sonia's Feeling Sad* (depression from a woman's point of view) available at: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/publications/booksbeyondwords/bbw/9781908020093.aspx

Intellectual Disability Mental Health First Aid Manual

By Kitchener BA, Jorm AF, Kelly CM, Pappas, R, Frize, M. 2nd ed. Melbourne: Orygen Youth Health Research Centre; 2010 [online] Accessed 28/06/2011

This is a supplement to the 2nd Edition Standard Mental Health First Aid Manual. It is a resource for people supporting adults with intellectual disability who are experiencing an emerging mental health problem or mental health crisis.

www.mhfa.com.au/cms/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/2nd_edition_id_manual_dec10.pdf

Mental health assessments for people with Intellectual Disability

PAS-ADD (Psychiatric Assessment Schedules for Adults with Developmental Disabilities) is the general name for a set of mental health assessments originally developed for people with intellectual disability.

On this UK website you will find information on the PAS-ADD suite of mental health assessments published by Pavilion Publishing (Brighton) Ltd (www.pavpub.com). The suite includes the PAS-ADD Checklist, Mini Pas-ADD, ChA-PAS and the newly published PAS-ADD Clinical Interview.

<http://79.170.44.140/pasadd.co.uk/>

A Guide to What Works for Depression

By Jorm, AF, Allen NB, Morgan AJ, Purcell R. beyondblue: Melbourne, August 2009 [online] Accessed 29/06/2011

This book provides a comprehensive review of all known treatments for depression, including medical, psychological and complementary and lifestyle interventions.

http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link_id=&tmp=FileDownload&fid=1406

Lifeline 24-Hour Counselling

Lifeline has trained volunteer counsellors available 24 hours a day for the cost of a local call (free from mobile phones).

www.lifeline.org.au or call 13 11 14

Kids Help Line

Kids Help Line is a free, confidential and anonymous counselling service specifically for young people aged between 5 and 25

www.kidshelp.com.au or freecall: 1800 55 1800* (*mobile phone calls incur a charge)

Copies of this publication are available from the Disability Information Service
Tel: 1300 786 117 Email: disabilityinfo@dfc.sa.gov.au Website: www.sa.gov.au/disability Version: July 2011



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