



DEGREES OF DEPRESSION

While feeling depressed can exhibit similar symptoms to clinical depression, approaches in treatment can be markedly different. MiNDFOOD examines both exogenous and endogenous forms of depression and learns how sufferers can take action and find happiness again.

Words by **Nicole Madigan**

When the Australian Bureau of Statistics conducted the latest National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing they found that one in five women in Australia will experience depression at some stage in their lives. It's a serious problem, but one that's received increased attention over recent years, and as a result, increased understanding and awareness.

But with more information, comes more confusion and, increasingly, women are left unsure whether they have depression, or are feeling sad or down. For Amanda Bennetts, her twenties were a dark cloud she'd rather forget. Envious of her carefree friends, Amanda found herself overwhelmed by constant feelings of sadness and discontent. So frequent were these negative feelings, the fog of melancholy began to take over her entire life.

Well aware of the prevalence of depression in Western society, Amanda was quick to let the tag define her current state of mind, promptly labelling herself as having "depression".

"I used the term depression as an excuse (to feel bad all the time)," says Amanda. Despite being in an unstable relationship with an alcoholic and working a job she didn't enjoy, Amanda blamed her feelings on a condition she felt she had no control over. It wasn't until she was close to 30 that she decided to have a closer look at her life.

Did she really have "depression" – or was she simply unhappy with the current state of her life?

"In my heart I knew there was more for me to do on this earth than wallow away in self-pity." And this is where things can get tricky. Depression does exist, but being depressed or simply sad for long periods of time usually calls for a different course of action. And when sadness has set in, it can be difficult to tell the difference.

But while differentiating between what the experts call exogenous depression (feeling depressed due to circumstances) and endogenous depression (chemical or genetic based depression) can be difficult – it is possible. And spotting that difference is an important first step on the journey back to happiness.

SO WHICH ONE IS IT?

The diagnosis of depression (or otherwise) can be a complicated one, according to psychologist Dr Joann Lukins. That's because in many cases, failure to accept problems that exist in your life is what causes people to become confused in the first place. "Facing it is the first crucial step," says Dr Lukins. "Until we are mindful of something

CHANGE FOR THE BETTER

Acknowledging there is a problem and then making any necessary changes may help you regain control of your life during periods of depression. However, for those who are clinically depressed, medication and therapy can also play key roles in recovery.

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that is unhelpful in our lives it becomes difficult for us to do something constructive about it." Once Amanda decided to face facts, she knew she had to make changes. Big changes. Amanda ended her destructive marriage as well as the majority of her friendships. "I cut off from almost everyone except my family and a handful of long-time positive friends." She also bought a sports car, changed her diet and lost 20kg.

Within 12 months, Amanda had a new relationship and launched her dream business – a decision that proved instrumental in her journey back to happiness. "I feel like I've created a world that fits instead of a world in which I have to fit into." For some women though, their depression runs deeper and a life overhaul simply isn't the answer.

Anna Spargo-Ryan found there was simply no explanation for her feelings of intense sadness. "It didn't make sense at all. I was a good student, I had a boyfriend I adored, great friends I'd had all my life and a wonderful family. My circumstances were probably the main reason I thought I couldn't have depression – what did I have to be depressed about?"

Determined to find happiness, Anna decided to visit a counsellor, and discovered she had a genetic and chemical predisposition to depression and was diagnosed as clinically depressed. Anna's depression has ebbs and flows but is rarely affected by changes in her life. "With clinical depression, you can have the perfect partner, the perfect house, the perfect job, the perfect kids and still be severely depressed."

FINDING HAPPINESS

The good news is, you can find happiness again, regardless of the type of depression you're experiencing. Seeking help is one of the bravest and smartest things you can do, says Dr Lukins.

If it's life that's getting you down, it's important to speak up and get the support of those closest to you. Similarly, if there's something more at play, it's important to get treatment.

Of course overhauling your life isn't as easy as it sounds. Change can be scary and facing something stressful in our lives takes courage and support. But as challenging as it can be to face facts, if you keep doing what you've always done, nothing will change. According to Dr Lukins the key to activating change is to be prepared.

To maximise the likelihood of success when making a major life change she recommends the following steps:

- Map out exactly what the change is going to be and why you wish to do it.
- Consider the potential obstacles and make plans for how to overcome them.
- Engage social support.
- Maximise opportunities for reinforcement – "What is my 'treat' for when I make this change?"
- Celebrate the successes as they occur.
- Know that relapse is a normal part of change and an opportunity to start again.

If you're suffering from clinical depression, your treatment will be different, and may involve medication, but you can achieve a similar result. For Anna, cognitive behavioural therapies and hypnotherapy have helped her keep the depression under control. She also has regular visits with a therapist. Her advice? Take action, regain control, but don't do it alone.



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Can you catch depression? Read about a new study into the "contagious" side of this illness.

KEY WORDS: DEPRESSION, CONTAGIOUS

SIGNS OF DEPRESSION IN WOMEN

According to Beyondblue [a not-for-profit organisation working to increase awareness and understanding of depression and anxiety], you may be experiencing depression if, for more than two weeks, you have felt sad, down or miserable most of the time or lost pleasure in most of your usual activities. Common behaviours, thoughts, feelings and physical symptoms associated with depression include:

- Not going out.
- Not getting things done at work.
- Withdrawing from family and friends.
- Relying on alcohol and sedatives or other drugs.
- No longer doing things you used to enjoy.
- Inability to concentrate.
- Thoughts such as "I'm a failure", "Nothing good ever happens to me", "Life's not worth living".
- Feeling overwhelmed, guilty or irritable.
- Feeling frustrated, unhappy or indecisive.
- Feeling disappointed, miserable or sad.
- Headaches and muscle pain.
- Sleep problems.
- Loss or change of appetite.
- Tired all the time.
- Sick and run-down.
- Significant weight-loss or gain.

Everyone experiences some or all of these symptoms from time to time, but when symptoms occur together and are severe or lasting, it's time to seek professional help.