

Depression

UNDERSTANDING THE DISORDER

by Kathy Burford

You look out the window and what you see is yet another day of rain. This time of year, the transition between spring and summer can have an affect on moods. The sun appears one day and you are outside in your garden raking up the last few leaves from last fall and enjoying the fresh air and warmth from the sun. The next day it is cold and raining. It seems pretty depressing when weather can affect moods but it does affect most of us at one time or another. Also, feeling down or fragile for a while can be a part of normal living and in a day or two we might be feeling back to our usual selves. All of this is completely natural. But chronic depression is no mere slump in mood. Unlike "the blues", which tend to clear up in a few days or when the weather changes for the better, chronic depression frequently is both prolonged and recurring. It cannot be ignored, and it can't be joked or whistled away. Sufferers of depression are likely to experience more than one of the following for several weeks or longer:

- Prolonged loss of interest in home, school and personal appearance;
- Loss of interest in sexual activity;
- Sudden changes and excesses in eating and sleeping habits;
- Frequent, uncontrollable crying;
- Lingering, unfocused nervousness or grouchiness;
- Persistent feelings of hopelessness and futility;
- Exaggerated feelings of guilt and worthlessness;

There are both psychological and physical causes of depression. Depression might be the temporary sadness that follows a loss or a change, or it might be a more disruptive illness that interferes with the ability to enjoy teaching and family life. Often the depressed person is overwhelmed by feelings of hopelessness and inaction which make it difficult for the person to reach out to others. But depression can be treated with a combination of support, medical or psychological intervention, and self-help.

If you suspect you suffer depression, it is important to get support by talking to someone you trust, such as a close family member or friend. Sharing feelings such as hopelessness, isolation or worthlessness, is the first step to recovery. Arranging to have a medical check-up is another first step, to rule out or identify any physical cause as to why you are feeling the way you do. If it is determined that your depression has a physical cause, treating the underlying illness may be the cure. Some types of depression respond well to medication but this must be decided by a medical specialist and monitored over a period of time. Depression resulting from a chemical imbalance can also be treated medically. Even depression with emotional causes may call for treatment with medication, and that is a decision that must be made by a physician who, in turn, must know the state of your physical health. Sometimes, and this is often seen especially among the elderly, chance combinations of medications taken for various medical conditions can produce depression. A physician will want to get a complete list of all the medicines you have been taking to determine whether the combination of drugs you are taking might be having an adverse effect on how you are feeling.

Depression can also be brought on by a life situation. Psychological or emotional causes for depression can include: distressing or threatening changes, death of someone close to you, divorce, job loss, or low self-esteem. If your depression is traceable to an event, a situation or from feelings of low self-worth, professional counselling or therapy may be helpful. Talking out problems with a counsellor can be helpful in treating depression and getting another perspective. No matter how trivial you consider your problems to be, or how hopeless you feel in doing anything about them, a counsellor takes your problems seriously and will give you undivided attention and direction. It will take time for the depression to lift, but the experience of safety and understanding from a professional counsellor can be a positive step on the road to recovery.

Depression, especially depression caused by a life situation, can sometimes be alleviated by following a healthy diet and getting regular exercise, especially aerobic exercise such as walking, bicycling or swimming. Scientists theorize that such exercise releases endorphins which help to calm the mind and help you feel more optimistic and in control. This approach can be useful, especially when done in conjunction with other forms of therapy.

Almost everyone who experiences a depression recovers and feels good again. Recovery is a step-by-step process, but the

first small step leads to the next one and, with help, you will be able to cope with life again.

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Kathy Burford is an EAP Coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for teachers. For confidential assistance, contact Kathy Burford (Ext. 242) or Claudette Coombs (Ext. 265).