



DEPRESSION: When low mood persists and affects your ability to enjoy life it may become depression – and it's important to seek help

Help at hand

KEN LIVINGSTONE, the former mayor of London, found himself in hot water last month after he made a derogatory remark about another politician's expressed opinion. The Labour stalwart suggested that Kevan Jones, the MP for North Durham, was obviously "very depressed and disturbed... (and he) might need some psychiatric help".

That would have been bad enough but Mr Jones has made no secret of the fact he suffers from depression and has been an eloquent spokesman for millions of silent sufferers. Livingstone's ill-thought comments show there is still a stigma towards mental health issues, with the suggestion that this makes a sufferer's viewpoint less valid, or them a weaker person.

Sadly mental ill-health, and specifically depression, is a very common illness, with up to a quarter of individuals reporting suffering low mood at some point. Although it is healthy to have ups and downs, with mood naturally varying in response to good or bad triggers, when low mood persists more than a certain amount of time, and affects your ability to enjoy life, it may then become depression.

Symptoms may start relatively mildly. For example you may feel tired and not want to get up in the morning. Or you may have a reduced interest in the things you used to take pleasure in. As time progresses you may experience restlessness or agitation. Things which used to be simple become difficult to process and this may be noticed by work colleagues. You may lose your confidence, leading to feelings of reduced worth. Depression does not just affect the sufferer – your partner may have noticed that you are not your usual self. Loss of interest in sex is a common feature of depression. In its worst form depression can leave the individual thinking that they would be better off not being here and contemplating self-harm or suicide.

There are multiple reasons why people become depressed. After an upsetting event, for example the death of a loved one, it is normal to have feelings of loss or remorse. Events which happened in a person's child-



Depression is one of the most common forms of illness you can suffer. North-East GP Zak Uddin says it is important to seek help and support

hood, for example physical or sexual abuse, are strong risk factors. Unfavourable personal circumstances including job uncertainty, money worries or poor housing are potential triggers. Certain chronic diseases, either through the perceived label of having an illness, or the pain and reduced function as a result of the disease may lead to depression. There are certain people more prone to depression, either through a strong family history or because of personality traits which predispose to the illness.

Depression is not a sign of weakness. Sir Winston Churchill famously referred to it as his "black dog", and over the years several high flying individuals from all walks of life have admitted to suffering with the disease.

Thankfully, the vast majority of people, including those in the healthcare profession, are very receptive to complaints of low mood or depression and are willing to help. This may be as simple as expressing how you feel to a loved one or work colleague. Sometimes talking things through can take a burden off your mind. If you feel that you need to talk to a professional, your family doctor can be one of the first people to turn to. They may ask about your specific symptoms, how long you've had them for, and how they impact on your life.

Treatment depends on the severity. For some people, a chat is all they need. If you

have issues that are maintaining your low mood, they may recommend counselling. For mild symptoms this is sometimes more appropriate than medication. Couples therapy is available for those experiencing relationship difficulties. Exercise on prescription may help provide a distraction and allow you to meet new people as well as increasing the production of endorphins, the so-called "happy chemicals" released by the brain in response to physical activity. Sometimes an anti-depressant medication is prescribed, either as an adjunct to the above, or on its own, depending on the severity of symptoms.

There are also numerous things you can do to promote positive mental health and well-being. A good work environment often provides the stability and support of fellow colleagues to address minor issues with mood. By the same virtue, a good social network may assist feelings of positive self-worth as well as reducing potential loneliness and isolation. Exercise has long been shown to be beneficial, not only for physical but also mental health.

In summary a low mood is a very common condition, and usually symptoms pass in a week or two. However, if you find them persisting it is important to seek help.

■ Useful websites: mentalhealth.org.uk; mind.org.uk

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Dr Zak Uddin