



## Intellectual Disability and Depression

Major depression is not just 'the blues', feeling low or sad for a few days. All of us experience 'the blues' at some time but can usually continue to function in our everyday lives and soon recover without treatment.

### What is Depression?

Major depression is distinguished from 'the blues' type depression by its severity, persistence, duration and the presence of characteristic symptoms.

Throughout our community, depression is common, affecting people of all ages and from all walks of life. At any given time, studies have shown, that about five per cent of the population can be experiencing a major depression and between 10 and 15 per cent of people will experience a major depression at some point in their lives.

People with intellectual disability can also suffer from major depression: research shows that the incidence is far higher than in the general population. However, sometimes the depression is not recognised and goes untreated.

### Recognising Major Depression

The symptoms of major depression are characterised by changes in the person's emotional or behavioural state. There are a variety of symptoms that occur in numerous combinations as major depression affects people in a variety of different ways.

Common symptoms include:

- ▶ Loss of interest in activities that were previously enjoyed
- ▶ Eating too much or too little, resulting in weight changes
- ▶ Feeling sad, anxious or agitated
- ▶ Experiencing sleeping difficulties such as sleeping badly or excessively but still feeling tired
- ▶ No 'get up and go', lack of energy and low motivation
- ▶ Feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness or guilt
- ▶ Loss of confidence and avoiding other people
- ▶ Moving or talking slowly
- ▶ Being snappy and more irritable
- ▶ Difficulties with concentration and memory.

---

However, people with intellectual disability can sometimes have some different symptoms than those above. Other signs to look out for include:

- ▶ 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, tearfulness and withdrawal.

### **What Causes Major Depression?**

The causes are different for each person and often there is combination of factors. Some of the causes can include:

- ▶ An event such as 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: children of parents with major depression are at greater risk of developing the condition
- ▶ An imbalance of chemicals in the brain that affect a person's mood
- ▶ Physical health problems such as thyroid dysfunction
- ▶ Various medications
- ▶ Past or present physical, emotional or sexual abuses.

### **Getting Help**

The first step is awareness and the time to get professional help is when a person's behaviour changes (eg withdrawal or gloom has gone on for several weeks). Speak to the person's doctor, their Service Coordinator, a mental health professional, a psychiatrist, psychologist or counsellor.

It may be useful to have a familiar person accompany the person with intellectual disability to their initial appointments, because they will be able to provide support and describe any changes they have noticed.

With early diagnosis and treatment, symptoms of depression can be reduced or eliminated, and the long-term outlook is good.

Data collection is a great help in assessment, treatment and prevention. It sets in place an objective behaviour observation system that can highlight patterns of behaviour change.

---

Some treatment options involve a combination of support, psychological approaches and medication:

- ▶ Support includes information on depression and treatment options, as well as environmental factors that may contribute to depression such as loneliness, lack of meaningful activities, greater home/work stress
- ▶ Psychological approaches include having the opportunity to explore problems and find practical solutions. Counselling may involve the use of charts, pictures, photos, drawings, and diaries to help describe feelings and worries
- ▶ Medication can be used to help the brain restore its chemical balance and alleviate symptoms. It may take two to four weeks before the effects are seen.

## **Other Helpful Resources**

### **Disability SA**

Centre for Disability Health

Telephone: 8397 8100

### **Adult Mental Health Services**

Assessment and Crisis Intervention Service (ACIS)

24 hours, 7 days per week

Telephone: 13 14 65 (statewide)

### **Beyond Blue**

Website: [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

### **SANE Australia**

Website: [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)

### **Black Dog Institute**

Website: [www.blackdoginstitute.org.au](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au)

