

COPING WITH THE FLU OUTBREAK

DEPRESSION

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NHS

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INTRODUCTION

This leaflet is one of a series about pandemic flu and mental health. The leaflets contain information about how the flu outbreak might affect your mental health, how to look after yourself, what to do if a problem persists, and where to find further information.

Pandemic flu is a type of influenza that occurs every few decades and which spreads rapidly to affect most countries and regions around the world. Its key features are:

- It affects the whole world, not just one area.
- It can occur at any time rather than being concentrated in winter time.
- It may affect two or three times as many people as ordinary flu – perhaps around one quarter of the population.
- It is likely to be more severe, and hence causes more serious illnesses and deaths.
- It may affect any age group rather than being a threat mainly to the very old and the very young.

Whilst all of us are familiar with a degree of adversity in life, the flu outbreak and its consequences is a particularly difficult and stressful experience for everyone, and some people may have to cope with being unwell, looking after family members or dealing with loss and bereavement. Coming to terms with the consequences that the flu has had for you and those close to you can take some time.

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This leaflet focuses on coping with depression; others cover bereavement, fatigue, recovering from trauma, and coping with worry and uncertainty.

What is depression?

You might experience times when you feel upset or low in mood. Such feelings are understandable when you have to deal with a lot of things at once. These feelings are part of a normal reaction to loss or stressful events and should resolve in time. The ability to deal with these feelings is often made easier by talking to someone close to you about how you are feeling.

However, for some, low mood can become more severe and difficult to shake off. When low mood persists in this way, it is referred to as 'clinical depression'. Clinical depression (or simply depression) is a common problem, it is estimated that as many as one in six will experience depression at some point in their lives. Below are some of the common signs and symptoms you may experience if you are depressed:

Emotions or feelings

- Feeling sad, numb, guilty, upset, despairing or angry
- Crying a lot, or feeling unable to cry
- Anxiety and fear
- Loss of interest and enjoyment
- Feeling alone, isolated and withdrawn

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Physical and bodily signs

- Tiredness or exhaustion
- Restlessness
- Changes in sleep – waking early or interrupted sleep
- Changes to appetite, eating and weight
- Poor memory and concentration
- Worsening of chronic conditions

Thoughts

- Having upsetting and gloomy thoughts, generally expecting the worst
- Thinking that everything is hopeless
- Losing confidence in yourself
- Difficulty in making decisions
- Thoughts of death and suicide

Changes in behaviour

- Finding it difficult to be with people
- Reduced activities
- Self neglect

Some of these symptoms, such as feeling tired, or changes to sleep and appetite, may be similar to those caused by the flu or side effects of treatment. If you are able to talk through your feelings with a medical professional, they can help decide whether it is your physical illness or depression that is making you feel as you do.

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People's experience of depression varies, and with it the extent to which they experience it. Not everyone experiences all these symptoms or with the same severity. The length of time people experience depression also tends to vary, although most people feel better again within four to six months.

What causes depression?

Depression can be triggered by a range of things, including biological and psychological factors. For example, someone may be born with an inherited tendency to depression, but they may not actually become depressed until they experience some kind of upsetting event. The flu pandemic, and the difficulties and stresses that go with it, is likely to provide a variety of triggers for depression. For example, bereavement, physical illness, a change in roles and responsibilities, worry and uncertainty could all trigger depression.

You are more likely to experience depression when you are physically unwell if:

- you have been depressed before
- you do not have family or friends you can talk to about your illness
- you have other problems or stresses going on in your life
- you are in considerable pain
- your illness prevents you from looking after yourself.

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How can you make yourself feel better?

Talk to others, tell others how you are feeling

Help yourself through activity

You may find yourself becoming less active, or avoid certain activities, possibly because you feel tired and do not have the energy and motivation to do things you used to do. One way to overcome depression is by increasing and/or modifying your daily activity, so that you increase things which you enjoy or which make you feel worthwhile. You can start by keeping a daily record of exactly how you are spending your time. Rate each activity from 0 to 10 according to how much pleasure or sense of achievement you get from it. After a period of at least a week, look back to pinpoint the activities that you enjoyed, and those that gave you a greater sense of achievement. You should then begin to plan more activities that give you a sense of pleasure and achievement.

Identify and evaluate negative thoughts

Negative thoughts are central to what keeps you depressed. Some people find distraction useful, so when a negative thought pops into your head, distract yourself from the thought by doing something that keeps your mind busy. Distraction is often used as a short-term coping strategy. In the long-term, you need to find other ways of managing your negative thoughts. One way to do this is to test the validity of your negative thoughts by examining

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all the evidence that supports or does not support each of your thoughts. Then taking into account this evidence will allow you to develop a more balanced alternative. It may be helpful to ask yourself how would you have viewed this situation before you became ill, or what might someone else think in this situation?

Problem solving

Problem solving is a useful way of tackling practical problems. Identify the problem you want to work on, and then think of as many solutions as possible. Choose the one that seems to be the best, and then work on putting this into action. Once you start, you will need to review your progress and possibly modify the solution.

Look after yourself

Resist the temptation to cope with your depression by using alcohol or other substances. In the short-term this may give you some relief, but in the long-term this can lead to other health and psychological difficulties. Having a good diet can help to keep you in good health and can aid recovery.

When should you seek professional help?

If your feelings of depression:

- don't seem to be getting better with time
- begin to affect your feelings towards family and friends, your work and your interests

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- If you feel that life is not worth living, or that other people would be better off without you.

If you are worried by any of the above, then see your GP.

KEY POINTS

- Feeling low in mood is common, particularly in circumstances such as those relating to a flu pandemic. Such feelings usually resolve themselves within a few days, and do not need treatment.
- Feeling low in mood becomes a problem when it is more severe, longstanding and starts to affect your daily life, or you experience suicidal thoughts. If this is the case, you should seek professional help.
- There are a number of things you can do to help yourself overcome depression. These include increasing your activity, identifying and evaluating negative thoughts, and problem solving.
- Talk to someone you trust about how you are feeling, and remember to look after yourself.

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Further reading

- Manage your Mind (2007) by Gillian Butler and Tony Hope, published by Oxford University Press.
- Overcoming Depression (1997) by Paul Gilbert, published by Robinson.
- Mind Over Mood (1995) by Dennis Greenberger and Christine Padesky, published by Guilford Press.
- Managing Depression (2005) by David Westbrook, available from www.octc.co.uk

Internet & other sources of information

About depression

- www.depressionalliance.org – provides information for people affected by depression.
- www.livinglifetothefull.com – an online self help course, using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) to help with feelings of low mood, stress and distress.
- www.samaritans.org – offers support to people who are despairing or suicidal.
- www.mind.org.uk – provides information on all aspects of mental health.
- www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk – a 24-hour advice service run by the NHS.

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About the flu

- Go to www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu and/or www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
- Call NHS Direct on 0845 4647
- Pick up leaflets from doctor's surgeries and other places.

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Other leaflets in this series:

- Bereavement (PB 246.09)
- Fatigue (PB 248.09)
- Recovering from Trauma (PB 249.09)
- Worry and Uncertainty (PB 250.09)

This and the other leaflets in this series can be found on the Oxfordshire Primary Care Trust's website:
www.oxfordshirepct.nhs.uk

If you need the information in another language or format, please contact us:

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Freephone: 0800 052 6088
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