

'A problem that is well formulated is half resolved'

– Charles Wettring –

■ What is depression?

About 12 per cent of the population experience depression severe enough to require treatment at some time or other in their life.

People experience depression in many different ways, but perhaps the most prominent feature is a low or sad mood. Other typical signs of depression include lethargy, trouble with sleeping or early wakening, feeling constantly tired, pessimistic negative thoughts, difficulty thinking straight or making decisions, change in appetite and loss of interest. There are different types of depressive reaction ranging from mild mood fluctuations or 'the blues', to severe clinical depression. At the severe end of the scale people often experience more marked physical symptoms and it seems likely that this is related to biochemical changes in the brain.

For most people a depressive reaction is triggered by a set of life events which they are finding difficult to cope with. Depression is not easy to 'snap out of', but there are ways that you can gradually free yourself from depression.

■ Vulnerability to depression

Some people are more vulnerable to depression than others. A number of protective factors have been identified which can decrease vulnerability to depression.

These include:

- ◆ A high self-esteem based on self-worth, not achievements.
- ◆ Practising positive thinking habits.
- ◆ Assertively expressing your needs, thoughts and feelings.
- ◆ Using an established social support network.
- ◆ Stress management – balancing demands and resources and looking after yourself.

■ The depressive spiral – thoughts, mood, behaviour

Recent research has established that depressed people are prone to continuous, automatic, negative thoughts. Their thinking becomes distorted and they practise recognised thinking errors such as: 'all or nothing thinking', 'awfulising', 'personalising', 'focusing on the negative', and 'jumping to conclusions'. These patterns of thinking produce a low mood state which results in reduced activity. Reduced activity produces less rewarding experiences, which produces further negative thoughts and low mood. A vicious spiral of thoughts, feelings and behaviour is created. To arrest this downward spiral a number of things are necessary:

- ◆ *Understand the problem.* Understand the many factors both in the present and the past that have led you to feel the way you do.
- ◆ *Challenge negative thinking.* Recognise that the way that you think determines the way that you feel. Identify distorted thinking patterns and replace with more rational thoughts.
- ◆ *Increase activity levels.* Gradually increase your activity levels – particularly physical activity. Identify and work towards short and longer term goals.
- ◆ *Use support systems.* A close confiding relationship is the single most effective protection against depression. Talk about how you feel.
- ◆ *Assert yourself.* Express yourself assertively. Say 'no' to excessive demands. Look after your own needs.