



MENTAL HEALTH 2017

It may surprise many people to know that the leading cause of ill-health and disability worldwide is not a bodily illness such as infection, heart disease, or cancer. It is a condition of the mind - depression. In fact, 1 in 4 people will experience at least one period of depression in their lifetime, mainly mild, and 1 in 10 people will be troubled enough or affected sufficiently to seek help from a doctor.

Depression comes in many different forms and falls across a spectrum of severity. One difficulty in determining its presence is the fact that at the mild end of the spectrum, it merges with what may be called *'The Human Condition'*. Many people will feel down or low from time to time, sometimes for clear reasons and sometimes not. Also, normal events routinely lead to very intense emotional states which have all the features of depression, but are not considered being an episode of a depressive illness, such as bereavement.

At this time, there is emotional pain and anguish, anxiety and restlessness. It can include an inability to sleep with early morning waking, a loss of appetite, loss of interest in sex and anything pleasurable, an inability to concentrate and focus, and loss of energy. This state of bereavement has many symptoms of depression and yet it is not considered to be depression, an illness or even abnormal. In fact it is so normal and expected that immediately following bereavement, if this state wasn't present then its absence would be considered abnormal.

The majority of depressions will not include all these symptoms but rather a number of these features will be present. The key feature being, a loss of enjoyment and interest in activities, or, experiences previously enjoyed, or an inability to experience pleasure. A low or sad mood is often present, but sometimes it is an inability to feel emotion. What marks this state as an illness is that it affects the person's ability to function across work, personal relationships and leisure activities. They may be able to fulfil all of their required tasks, but they are inefficient and it takes more out of them than it would normally. They have no time, energy or interest in partaking in leisure activities that isn't a requirement. In time, if the state continues they gradually start to fail in meeting their duties and the effect of depression on their functioning becomes apparent.

Depression may follow events, typically major life-events and in the case of loss it is diagnosed when it persists weeks or months after the event. However it may just appear with no preceding or explanatory event. Typically, a person develops depression when they experience long periods of stress, especially when they perceive themselves as having little control over the environment that is stressing them, i.e. workplace difficulties, family stressors, loss.

A close cousin of depression is a state known as anxiety. Everyone would have experienced episodes of anxiety at times. It is an innate response to threat and is necessary to promote good performance and focus. However, it is an unpleasant state

and can occur for prolonged periods of time when there is no threat or stress present. It can occur in an extreme sudden way which is known as panic.

Anxiety is frequently a symptom of depression, indeed it may be the main feature of someone's depression. However, it also appears as a condition in its own right, interfering with the person's ability to function well. It may be present all the time, so-called free-floating anxiety, or it may occur in relation to certain situations such as leaving the house (agoraphobia) or being in an enclosed space (claustrophobia). So unpleasant is the experience that a sufferer will alter their lifestyle so as to avoid situations that bring on the anxiety.

For both depression and anxiety there is help and treatment available, which is often successful in reducing the conditions. The two main treatments are those of talking therapies with a trained therapist, and medication, usually in the form of an anti-depressant. Often, both forms are used together. However, the key element to deciding how to help someone best is to gain as full an understanding of their state and circumstances as possible from the person and often their close family which happens at assessment.

Overall, the outlook for anyone experiencing these extremely common conditions is good, and treatment, therapy and help from the specialist services improves the outlook even more.

The contact number for the St Helena Mental Health Team is 22593.

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**SHG
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