

HEALTH MANAGEMENT INSIGHTS

Depression

What is depression?

Most of us go through periods of feeling down at times but with depression the low mood is more severe and persists for weeks or months. It is neither a sign of weakness nor something the individual can 'snap out of'. Sometimes the episode is triggered by difficult events in the person's life but there is not always an identifiable cause.

Depression causes the individual to experience persistent feelings of sadness or low mood that are present nearly every day along with a loss of interest or pleasure in most things. Other symptoms may include, for example, fatigue, reduced concentration, indecision, low levels of motivation, reduced or excessive sleep, changes in appetite,

feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts. In mild cases, an individual may be able to continue with most activities including work; in more severe cases, symptoms may markedly impact on day to day function. The good news is that most people respond well to treatment.

How is it treated?

Evidence-based treatments include antidepressant medications and a course of talking therapy (counselling) especially cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). To some extent medications are prescribed on a trial basis and it may take a number of weeks such medication have a noticeable effect. Depending on the individual's response, the dosage or the type of medication may be varied. It is important that the individual's response to treatment is monitored by the GP, and most cases of depression are managed successfully in general practice.

However, those with more severe or persistent symptoms, or with complicating factors, may be referred to a psychiatrist or other members of the mental health team. Lifestyle factors may need to be addressed, for instance, the use of alcohol as an unhealthy coping mechanism, and there is some evidence that exercise is of benefit in managing depression.

Managing depression in the workplace

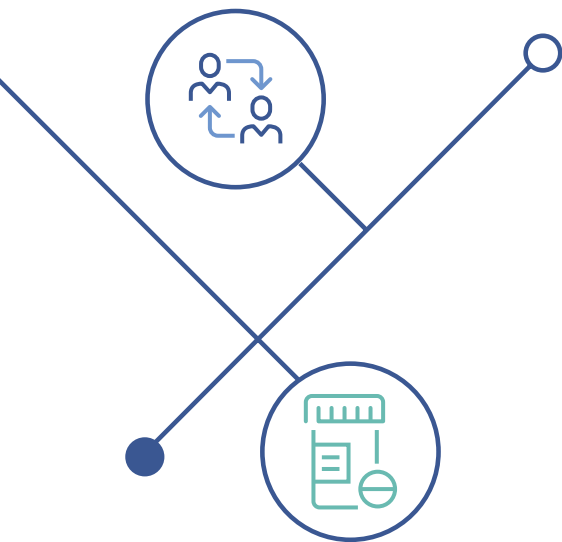
- > Aim as an organisation to address any stigma regarding mental health conditions and treat depression the same as physical illness.
- > Managers should sensitively enquire about an employee's psychological wellbeing if they have concerns, and arrange follow-up meetings to provide on-going support.
- > Encourage the employee to speak to their GP and signpost them to other sources of support such as mental health first aiders, an employee counselling service or other workplace provision, the Samaritans and the mental health charity MIND.
- > Depression is associated with an increased risk of suicide. If a manager

identifies a significant risk of suicide they should arrange an urgent clinical assessment of risk by an appropriate health professional. The best course of action may include arranging or facilitating an urgent GP appointment (ideally the same day); or in cases of immediate risk, accompanying the individual to the GP or to A&E, or dialling 999.



A **temporary restriction** from safety-critical tasks may be required during the illness





- > Workplace adjustments may potentially help an individual to remain at work with depression, and to return to work after a period of sickness absence. Being supported to continue working can often be a helpful measure since many employees find that work is a helpful focus at these times. Necessary supportive adjustments might include: a reduced or simplified workload, flexible or reduced hours, additional breaks, a phased 'return to work' programme after sickness absence.
- > Individuals with depression are psychologically vulnerable to stress, and if there are perceived work-related stressors, carry out a stress risk assessment with a view to removing / minimising these risks.

- > Take a pro-active approach by building a work culture 'from the top down' that promotes good mental health. This might involve arranging mental health awareness and training for staff, providing mental health first aiders who employees can talk to in confidence, and creating a Mental Health Strategy for the organisation. If employees feel able to talk more openly about their mental health this may lead to a more psychologically resilient workforce and less mental health-related sickness absence.



Managers should **keep in touch** during a period of sickness absence

Further sources of information

- [Mind](#)
- [NICE](#)
- [HSE](#)
- [ACAS](#)
- [Mental Health at Work](#)
- [Access to work](#)
- [CIPD](#)

