

Appendix 5. Information for patients

Depression

Information for patients, family and
interested people.

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This brochure has been prepared using knowledge based on the scientific information available at the time of publication.

INTRODUCTION

This brochure is designed for people who want to know what depression is and what to do about it.

Depression is one of the most frequent mental disorders. It is estimated that it affects one out of every six Spaniards at some point in their life.

If you think that you or someone you know has depression, take it seriously and seek help.

This brochure provides you with information and useful help. The guideline focuses on depression (major depressive disorder) in adults, and it encompasses mild, moderate and severe depression.

However, this information does not consider specific depressive disorders in certain populations or other mental disorders with depressive symptoms, such as the following:

- ~ Depression in children.
- ~ People with major depression that have an additional physical or mental disorder.
- ~ Dysthymic disorder or dysthymia (a less severe although persistent form of depression that often starts early in life and that can be present simultaneously with a major depressive disorder).
- ~ Bipolar disorder (an affective disorder that involves extreme changes in mood. The states of high emotion and overwhelming energy are called mania, and the periods of low moods have the same symptoms as major depression).
- ~ Adaptive disorder with a depressive mood state (a type of pathological reaction to stress that is less severe than the major depressive disorder).

The information that follows does not attempt to explain depression in depth. If you have doubts or would like more information, you can ask your physician or other professional of the health team.

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

Depression is much more than being down.

Although most of us experience sadness once in awhile, for some people these symptoms do not disappear, and they are accompanied by other symptoms that cause distress or difficulties for taking on their daily life. These people may have a disorder called depression.

What are the symptoms of depression?

- ~ The symptoms of depression can vary from one person to the next. The fundamental symptoms are:
 - ~ Low mood, sadness or feelings of despair, or
 - ~ Loss of interest in the activities that they used to enjoy, or getting scarce pleasure out of doing them most days in recent weeks.
- ~ Other possible symptoms that are present with certain frequency are the following:
 - ~ Irritability (getting angry easily).
 - ~ Feeling like crying for no apparent reason.
 - ~ Loss of energy or tiredness.
 - ~ Sleep problems.
 - ~ Changes in appetite, which sometimes lead to weight changes.
 - ~ Difficulty at concentrating or memory problems.

- ~ Loss of sexual interest.
- ~ Feelings of uselessness or guilt.
- ~ Negative thoughts, excessive self-criticism.
- ~ Desire to die or suicidal ideas.

Often, people with depression also experience constant worrying, which leads to anxiety. This can cause physical symptoms such as pain, heart palpitations or abdominal complaints. In some people, these physical symptoms are their main complaint, and sometimes they eventually feel so bad that they would rather be dead.

Depression can make the smallest task seem like climbing a mountain.

WHAT CAUSES DEPRESSION?

Different events can act like triggers of depression in different people. Sometimes, depression appears with no apparent cause.

Some circumstances that increase the risk of depression are the following:

- ~ Having suffered a depressive episode in the past.
- ~ History of depressed persons in the family.
- ~ Experiences of loss or stress, including the death of loved ones, unemployment, loneliness, changes in lifestyle or problems in interpersonal relationships.
- ~ Conflictive situations in their environment (for example, at work, at home or in other contexts).
- ~ Having suffered physical or psychological traumas.
- ~ Serious physical illness or chronic health problems.
- ~ Some medicines (this can be consulted with your physician).
- ~ Alcohol abuse or consuming other drugs can worsen depression.
- ~ Some women can be more vulnerable to depression after childbirth, especially if any of the aforementioned risk factors are present.
- ~ Positive experiences such a close relationship with a partner, friend, family or colleagues usually help to prevent depression.

TYPES OF DEPRESSION

Some people have an episode of major depression only once in their life. However, about half of the people who have had one episode of depression have at least one more. The duration of the depressive episode is variable, although most feel better after 4 to 6 months have elapsed. In some cases, the symptoms can persist for a much longer period of time (depression that lasts 2 years or more is called chronic depression).

The severity of depression varies enormously.

Some people only have a few symptoms that partially affect their daily life or limit it in some specific aspect. This is called mild depression. Other people can have many more symptoms that eventually cause an impairment or generalised disability; in this case, the depression is qualified as moderate or severe.

WHAT CAN I DO IF I THINK I HAVE DEPRESSION?

If you think that you may be depressed, ask for help as soon as possible.

There's no reason why you have to face depression alone. You can do any of the following things:

- ~ Talk with someone you trust about your feelings. For example, someone from your family, your partner, a friend or any other person you can think of.
- ~ Talk with your physician or other healthcare professional. You will thus be able to receive a suitable diagnosis, learn about the treatment options and participate in the decision-making in this regard.
- ~ If you have thoughts about hurting yourself, it is a good idea to talk with someone you trust who can be with you until you feel better. You can also call the emergency telephone number (061, 112), seek medical help at the nearest location or request specific telephone support for patients with suicidal ideas (consult the additional information section).
- ~ Contact a support group. Certain NGOs and associations have this support service in some cities.
- ~ Learn more about depression so that you can better understand your symptoms and their meaning.

If you talk with someone and feel that they don't understand you, speak with somebody else.

It may also be beneficial for you to improve your overall health through daily physical exercise and a healthy diet. Some forms of self-help are described on the following pages. It can be very hard to make some of these changes when you are depressed, so turn to friends and family to get their support.

Don't think that it's simply a question of getting tough, and don't resort to alcohol or drugs; these things don't help.

WHAT CAN THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM OFFER ME IF I HAVE DEPRESSION?

Information and support

If you have depression, healthcare professionals can provide you with information and support. This information refers to the nature, course and possibilities of treatment, as well as information regarding community and self-help resources.

Given the existence of different therapeutic options, it is a good idea to have sufficient information about the illness and the proposed treatment before starting it. It is important for you to feel involved in any decision and for you to perceive that the healthcare professional who takes care of you keeps your preferences in mind.

In general, professionals will use language that you can understand, and they will avoid medical jargon as much as possible. If you don't understand something, it is preferable to ask than to have any doubts.

Confidentiality

Appointments between a patient with depression and healthcare professionals are governed by rules that protect confidentiality.

Your primary care physician (PCP)

Your PCP is probably the first person in the healthcare service who you can contact due to your depression. Most people with depression can be taken care of effectively by their PCP. They will ask you questions about your feelings, thoughts, behaviour, recent changes in your life or physical

health and about a family history of mental disorders, among other things. It is important that you be as open as possible about the things that you consider important in order to understand what is happening to you. As we have already seen, due to the fact that depression has different causes and different symptoms, every person with depression receives personalised treatment.

Specialised mental health services

Your PCP may think that you need care from a mental health specialist, especially if your depression is severe, it does not respond to treatment or in cases of repeated episodes. Only very occasionally are people with depression hospitalised.

HOW IS DEPRESSION TREATED?

There are several treatments that can help you and that have proven efficacy in depression.

They include the following:

- ~ Self-help techniques.
- ~ Psychological therapies.
- ~ Pharmacological therapy.

Mild depression can improve on its own without treatment or with advising on how to face problems. Self-help and psychological therapies are effective. Psychological therapies include counselling and other specific therapies for depression. Antidepressant drugs also help in some cases.

Some people use alternative or complementary procedures, such as acupuncture, yoga, massage or certain food supplements, although there is no solid evidence that allows them to be recommended. St John's Wort is an herbal therapy that could be useful, but it can cause serious interactions with a wide range of medicines that are frequently used, such as oral contraceptives, anticoagulants and anticonvulsants. Consult your physician, given that using it is not harmless.

For moderate depression, psychological therapies and antidepressants work equally well.

For severe depression, the most recommendable treatment is drugs in combination with psychological therapy. In a few cases, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) or electroshock therapy is recommended, which, despite its bad reputation, is safe, quick and effective treatment that is administered at a hospital under general anaesthesia.

Keep in mind that there are health professionals who are experts and assessing and treating depression and who can help you. The most adequate treatment depends on each specific case and on your preferences. The main thing is to use a treatment that works and to give it the necessary time for that to happen. Keep in touch with your primary care physician, especially if the treatment doesn't seem to help you improve. The first treatment proposed does not always produce the expected results.

Self-help techniques

Day planning

When someone experiences feelings of sadness or depression, it can be truly difficult to get going to do anything. Nevertheless, the more active you are, the greater the likelihood that you will feel better.

The following advice is usually useful:

- ~ You can make a list of the activities that you propose to do every day (with the help of someone, if necessary).
- ~ Keep this list handy.

- ~ At the beginning, don't be very demanding with yourself.
- ~ It is important to do some gratifying activity at least once a day.
- ~ Plan on doing some physical activity every day.
- ~ If miss some point in your plan, jump to the next activity.
- ~ If you don't feel like doing anything at all, plan on doing some activity with other people.
- ~ Observe how your mood changes as you progress, and share this fact with others.

Stress management

- ~ If problems seem so suffocate your, think about one at a time.
- ~ Enjoy the small things, and get time for yourself.
- ~ Learn to recognise when you need to stop, we all have a limit. Don't be too harsh on yourself.

Physical activity

- ~ Increase your physical activity, and get fresh air and natural light every day.
- ~ A regular routine of vigorous exercise is ideal, but any physical activity is better than none.
- ~ It's possible that a group activity may make it easier to meet this objective.
- ~ If you have doubts about the most appropriate physical exercise for you, check with your doctor.

Sleep problems

- ~ Keep a routine for your sleep times.
- ~ Do something relaxing before going to bed.
- ~ Avoid naps or sleeping during the day; they can aggravate the problem.
- ~ Avoid or reduce stimulants (coffee, energy drinks or drinks with cola, tobacco or alcohol, especially after nightfall).
- ~ If you can't sleep, get up and go to another room (you can watch television or read) until you feel sleepy. Don't stay in bed worrying about your sleep difficulties.
- ~ Don't fall asleep on the sofa.

Abuse of alcohol and other drugs

- ~ Alcohol abuse or consuming other drugs can make your depression get worse and cause other problems.
- ~ Ask for help from your friends, family or your doctor for decreasing consumption or reaching abstinence.
- ~ There are healthcare aids specialised in treating these problems, if you need them.

Psychological therapies

In the healthcare system, treatments that have been specifically designed for people with depression may be proposed, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, interpersonal therapy and couples therapy. Research has demonstrated that these therapies are effective and can help to reduce the appearance of new episodes in the future (recurrence).

Cognitive behavioural therapy focuses on modifying negative thinking styles and behaviour that contribute to triggering and maintaining depression. People with moderate or severe depression normally receive 16 to 20 cognitive behavioural therapy sessions over several months (although it can last longer or shorter, depending on individual circumstances or needs).

Interpersonal therapy helps people with depression to identify and manage specific problems in relationships with family, friends, colleagues and other people. If your depressive symptoms do not improve with individual psychological therapy, and you have a partner, **couples therapy** might be suggested, in which you both participate.

These therapies are provided by professionals who are trained on these techniques and who are experts at using them, normally clinical psychologists or psychiatrists.

Pharmacological therapy

The main drugs used in treating depression are called antidepressants. These medicines work by increasing the activity and levels of certain substances in the brain, called neurotransmitters, which help to improve your mood. There are several different classes of antidepressants.

If you have sufficient information about antidepressants, your preferences can be taken into account. Your doctor can also assess the outcomes and your experience with any previous treatment.

It is important to know that antidepressants do not cause an addiction or the need to take more medication in order to feel the same effects with the passage of time.

Most treatments need some time before there are any results

Before a person begins taking antidepressants, he must keep in mind that the medication needs a certain amount of time to work (several weeks are normally needed in order to experience any improvement and to determine if a drug is useful). Therefore, you must continue to take the medication as it has been prescribed for you, even if at the beginning you doubt its benefits.

Your physician can inform you about the side effects that can be expected from your medication. Most are tolerable by almost everyone. Even though antidepressants do not cause an addiction, certain symptoms can be experienced when they are withdrawn. These symptoms can consist of dizziness, nausea, anxiety and headaches. They normally have a mild intensity, although the intensity can sometimes be greater, above all if the medication is interrupted abruptly.

The time period during which treatment is received with antidepressants varies from one person to the next. Normally, it is recommended that medication be maintained for a minimum of 6 months at the same dose at which you reached improvement. In some cases, your doctor may advise you to modify the dose or switch the type of antidepressant.

Remember: if an antidepressive drug has been prescribed for you, your doctor can explain:

- ~ **About the symptoms that it acts on**
- ~ **How long it will take to act**
- ~ **How long you will need to take it**
- ~ **What are its possible side effects**

HOW CAN I HELP SOMEONE WITH DEPRESSION?

It can be very hard to see that a loved one is depressed. It wouldn't be strange for you to feel very overwhelmed, disoriented or embarrassed about what is happening.

The family, partner and intimate friends of people with depression have found the following strategies to be useful:

- ~ Learn about depression, its treatment and what you can do to help their recovery.
- ~ Consider yourself part of the support and treatment team.
- ~ Don't think that the person with depression does not want to improve, even though at times it may seem so. Try to see the symptoms for what they are: part of a disorder.

- ~ Help them to recognise the sources of stress and to find the most suitable way to face it. Your cooperation might be necessary to solve some of the problems that especially worry your family member or friend.
- ~ Encourage them to be more active, but without overdoing it and without criticising or reprimanding, given that that can make things worse.
- ~ Help them to lead a healthy life, to do some physical exercise and to have fun.
- ~ Dedicate part of your time to being with him or her.
- ~ Praise each one of their advances, especially at the beginning and for however small they may be.
- ~ Encourage them to maintain the prescribed treatment and to avoid alcohol and other toxic substances.
- ~ From the outset, take any suicidal thought seriously. Don't be afraid about talking with them about this subject openly. If your family member feels insecure about hurting themselves, stay with him or her. You can contact healthcare personnel or use the emergency service telephone number (061, 112).

If you are caring for someone with severe depression, it is essential to find time for yourself without feeling bad or guilty. Living with a family member who has depression can wear you down, and it is therefore important to take care of yourself as best as possible and to stay well psychologically.

MORE INFORMATION

- ~ **Emergency telephone numbers 061 or 112.**
- ~ **Confederación Española de Agrupaciones de Familiares y Personas con enfermedad mental (they offer information and support for family members and patients, and they also have some psychosocial resources): www.feafes.com.**
- ~ **“Hope” telephone number (they have a 24-hour crisis phone number in the main Spanish cities): www.telefonodelaesperanza.org.**