Introduction to Depression

What is depression?
Depression can be defined in a number of ways:
• an illness, just like heart disease or diabetes;
• an illness that affects the entire body, not just the mind;
• an illness that one in five people will suffer at some point in their life;
• a major cause of alcohol and drug abuse and other addictions;
• an illness that can be successfully treated in more than 80 per cent of cases; and
• an illness that affects all ages, races, economic groups and both male and females. However, for some unknown reason women suffer from depression almost twice as much as men do.

Depression is NOT:
• something to be ashamed of or embarrassed about;
• the same thing as feeling “down” or having the “Monday morning” blues;
• a character flaw or the sign of a weak personality; and
• a mood that someone can “snap out of”.

What causes depression?
This question really has two answers. The physiological cause is an imbalance of chemicals in the brain, called neurotransmitters. These help the brain cells to communicate with each other and any imbalance disrupts the brain’s mood-regulating system. Research has linked changes in the levels of these neurotransmitters to the individual symptoms of depression, including sleep problems, irritability, anxiety, fatigue and feelings of sadness.

In terms of what makes one person susceptible to depression and not another, it is known that depression does run in families. Studies of twins and adopted children suggest that susceptibility is genetic, rather than environmental. Depression is more likely among those who have suffered stress over a long period, amongst abuse victims and those who have suffered some major crisis in their lives such as divorce or the breakdown of a relationship, job loss (or even promotion) or the death of a loved one.

The prevalence of depression in the legal profession
Studies undertaken by the Brain and Mind Research Institute have shown that 9.5 per cent of survey participants had experienced depression, 25.8 per cent of family members had experienced depression and 25.5 per cent of participants and a family member had experienced depression.

Research conducted in 2006 by Beaton Consulting in conjunction with beyondblue, confirms that one in five people in Australia will have an episode of depression in their lives (Annual Professions Survey Research Summary, April 2007)

In addition, 38.8 per cent of respondents believed depression was a main cause of death or disability in Australia.

What are the signs and symptoms that I should be looking out for?
• Absenteeism, or presenteeism (being in the office but being non-productive).
• Falling productivity and simple errors occurring.
• Indecision.
• Bad decisions or rash decisions.
• Poor morale and uncharacteristic lack of co-operation.
• Complaints of aches and pains or tiredness on a regular basis.
• Disruptive, interfering or domineering behaviour to other team members.
• Alcohol or drug use or abuse.
• A general reluctance to socialise or participate in company activities.
What are the treatment options?

Generally there are many options available to people, however a visit to your general practitioner is recommended. Anti-depressant drugs may be prescribed and they can be very effective at restoring the chemical balance in the brain. But it does take a long time to start working, by which time many patients may have become discouraged and stopped taking them. If the drug prescribed is ineffective even after six weeks, there are many other types that should be tried. Counselling is highly recommended as it is vital to address the problem, such a stress, which caused the illness to develop in the first place.

How can I help a work colleague?

- Learn a little bit about depression because it is a common problem among the general population.
- Think of depression as a possibility, especially if they display any of the above mentioned symptoms or signs.
- Look out for depression especially if there has been a death in the family, a change in job responsibilities, such as promotion or demotion, or any significant personal upsets over the past few weeks or months.
- Look out for depression but DO NOT diagnose it or attempt to treat it. This is a job for professionals.
- Hints of suicide such as “life is not worth living” should be taken seriously. Depression can kill and suicide is a result of people unable to see positives reasons to live.
- Encourage them to get help. They may well realise they are depressed but the negative thinking that goes with the illness may stop them seeking help. Be there to support them and, if appropriate, offer to come with them to the doctor (especially if they have no-one else to rely on).
- Do not blame them. No-one chooses to be depressed.
- Always make a point of welcoming them back to work. Remember that they may not be able to instantly resume their original work capacity, but may need to ease their way back in. Be supportive and encourage them to give you feedback about how they feel once they return to work.

Where can people get help, advice or support?

- Your general practitioner in the first instance
- beyondblue – for general information and advice visit [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)
- Lifeline – a 24-hour counselling service (13 11 14)
- Victorian Suicide Helpline – a 24-hour counselling service (1300 651 251)
- SANE Helpline – 9am-5pm Monday to Friday (1800 688 382)
- LawCare – LIV members-only confidential counselling service (0408 586 966)
- VLHL (Victorian Lawyers’ Health Line – 8am-6pm Monday to Friday (1300 664 744)

Please note that the inclusion of these above-mentioned services do not mean that we endorse or recommend them. They are provided for your benefit as an initial point of contact. It is recommended that you explore other avenues should you not be satisfied with the outcomes of using one of the above

Be AWAre of your symptoms
• Pay attention to your mood changes and note what is going on around you that led to these changes. Understand why mood changes happen.
• Own your feelings, do not be afraid to admit how you are honestly feeling.
• Be alert to your body – your posture and facial expression. These are non-verbal clues to your emotions.
• Be aware of the symptoms of depression – loss of confidence and motivation, problems concentrating and making decisions. When you experience these, it is a strong possibility that these feelings are due to your illness.
• Automatic negative thoughts are common in depression – “I answered that question badly so I blew the interview”, “Everyone thinks I’m fat and ugly”, “I always fail at everything I do”. Recognise when you have these thoughts. Try not to let these negatives thoughts rule or dictate your day.

ANSWER negative thoughts
• Answer negative thoughts by asking whether they’d stand up in a court of law. “I’m no good at anything.” Look at the evidence and give yourself a fair trial before you convict yourself.
• Ask yourself whether you’re thinking in “all-or-none” terms – thinking this way can make everything seem bad if it’s not perfect! Almost everything in life is in degrees or on a continuum. That presentation may not have been brilliant, but it wasn’t terrible either.
• Ask yourself how you might consider something if you weren’t suffering from depression. Would you really think a cold sore was the end of the world?
• Look for the distortions in your thinking. How do you know what everyone else is thinking about you? Be positive and your positivity will work wonders.
• Are you confusing a low probability with a high probability? “They will probably fire me for missing three days at work” could give way to “When was the last time they fired anyone at this firm for being unwell?”.

ACT differently
• Focus on your strengths. Think carefully about what you are good at (ask a loved one if you need to), and concentrate on building these up. Take pleasure in your own ability.
• Think about your goals in life and work towards them. If you want to be happy and get the most out of your life, then negative thinking is not helping you to achieve happiness.
• Increase your involvement in positive activities that you enjoy – spending time with friends – and decrease your involvement in negative ones - resign from that non-essential and often stressful committee.
• Exercise regularly and do not feel guilty for doing so. Find a sport that you enjoy and make time for it each and every week. Physical activity improves mood and counters the fatigue common in depression.
• Address problems when they arise. No one has a life free of difficulties, but try not to let them make you depressed. Identify the problem as concretely as possible, consider various approaches, select the most promising approach and carry through. Apart from time set aside to specifically deal with the problem, don’t let yourself dwell on it or feel overwhelmed and helpless. If you need additional help from a professional, then seek it without delay. The sooner issues or concerns are addressed the sooner things can be rectified and the sooner you can be mostly worry-free.

Acknowledgement
We wish to extend our gratitude to the chief executive of LawCare in the UK, Hilary Tilby. Please note that much of the material contained in this section has been reproduced with the permission of LawCare UK (www.lawcare.org.uk/stressanddepression.htm).