

A Long Way DOWN

WHILE DEPRESSION IS THE MOST COMMON MENTAL ILLNESS IN SINGAPORE, UP TO TWO THIRDS OF SUFFERERS DO NOT REALISE THAT THEY HAVE THE CONDITION AND SO DO NOT SEEK HELP.

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WHEN LYDIA* WAS FIVE years old, her father died of cancer. She lived with her mother

and siblings in a one-room rental flat. Her mother struggled to cope as a single parent and was about to put Lydia and her siblings up for adoption when Lydia's aunt stepped in and volunteered to bring up the children.

"My aunt was the mother I never had," says Lydia, now 27. "She was strict but always gave me the best she could."

However her happiness was short-lived. When Lydia was 17, her aunt was diagnosed with cancer. She accompanied her aunt for chemotherapy, massaged her wherever she ached and did what she could to cheer her up.

"For a year, I watched my aunt waste away. She became weaker and weaker, and there was nothing I could do," says Lydia who coped with her pain and sorrow by cutting herself.

When her aunt died, Lydia's condition worsened. "The day my aunt passed away, a part of me died too," she says. "I wished I had died along with her. I soon started binge drinking. I was not able to hold on to a stable relationship because I was afraid of being 'abandoned' again. I felt sad for months after my aunt died."

What Lydia went through — bereavement — is not unusual. Everybody experiences the loss of a loved one, relationship failures, a major illness or a

setback at work. Many people go through a period of sadness but will naturally get over that in time.

But some people — like Lydia — will not recover from these episodes. Instead, they will go on to develop Major Depressive Disorder, commonly known as depression.

The Singapore Mental Health Survey, a study conducted by the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) in 2010, showed that 6.3 per cent of the adult population in Singapore has suffered from depression at some point in their lives.

People with depression will usually experience a combination of symptoms such as a change in sleep patterns, a change in appetite, fatigue, losing interest in an activity they had previously found acceptable, a diminished ability to concentrate, and inappropriate feelings of guilt and worthlessness. They may harbour suicidal thoughts, have trouble functioning socially and have problems coping with work.

But what makes this group of people more susceptible to depression than others?

Dr Charles Mak, Registrar of General Psychiatry at IMH, says, "Depression is a complex illness. In addition to the presence of adverse life events or stressors, several other factors seem to increase the risk of developing the condition."

Depression is caused by an imbalance of certain neurotransmitters (chemical messengers) in the brain such as serotonin,

Am I depressed?

According to the Institute of Mental Health, if you're experiencing five or more of these symptoms for two weeks or longer, you may have depression. For a qualified diagnosis, speak to your doctor. He or she will be able to advise you on what treatments are available.

- Feeling down or gloomy or experiencing a persistent sadness
- Losing interest in activities you previously enjoyed, such as socialising with friends and family, most of the day, nearly every day
- Losing of appetite and losing of weight
- Staying up at night, and not being able to sleep. However, some people sleep more than normal
- Feeling restless and getting agitated more easily.
- Feeling tired and lacking energy
- Losing the ability to concentrate and make decisions
- Feeling of worthlessness and guilt
- Having recurrent thoughts of dying or suicide



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norepinephrine and dopamine. In addition, there may be psychosocial factors which may include childhood trauma, substance abuse, an individual's personality traits and a family history of depression.

In Lydia's case, her depression was caused by a series of events beginning with her father's death, being 'abandoned' by her mother and the death of her aunt. Her binge drinking may have also contributed towards her depression.

The condition may also be related to her gender and age. "Depression is twice

as likely to affect women as men," Dr Mak says. "More conclusive research is needed with regard to the reasons behind this gender difference but it has been suggested that biological and hormonal factors may be involved."

The differences in how men and women cope with stressors, social roles and cultural influences may also play a part, adds Dr Mak.

According to the American Psychological Association, men are more likely than women to say they play sports and listen to music as a way of managing

stress. They are also more likely than women to say they do nothing to manage their stress.

Depression can affect people of any age "but the typical age of onset and period of highest risk for severe depression is during young adulthood," says Dr Mak.

Wrestling With Demons

One of the common misconceptions about depression is that a person who is depressed can just snap out of it — if they really wanted to. However, according to

(BEATING DEPRESSION)



DON'T BOTTLE IT

Resorting to alcohol to drown the pain can cause even more pain. Several studies have shown that there is a very close relationship between substance abuse — such as binge drinking or drug abuse — and depression.

The two conditions occur together in an extremely high percentage of adults

and there are two ways that this can happen. Substance abuse itself affects brain chemistry. “It is not uncommon for a person to develop depressive symptoms after intoxication or withdrawal from a substance,” says Dr Charles Mak, Registrar of General Psychiatry, IMH.

On the other hand,

depression can lead to substance misuse. This happens when depressed individuals turn to alcohol or drugs in an attempt to self-medicate themselves and ease the symptoms of depression. “This may in turn perpetuate or worsen the depression in the long run,” says Dr Mak.

Dr Mak, untreated depression has a low chance of improving on its own and may lead to serious consequences such as suicide.

Based on a study published in the journal *Psychological Medicine* in August this year, researchers from the Queensland Centre for Mental Health Research in Australia found that only 23 per cent of untreated depression cases will resolve naturally within three months, 32 per cent after nine months, and just over half within a year. The researchers added that these findings may not apply to individuals with more severe cases of depression.

Unfortunately, misconceptions on the nature of depression coupled with a societal taboo against seeking help for mental disorders mean that many depressed people go untreated for too long.

The Singapore Mental Health Survey found that the majority of people with mental illnesses in Singapore did not seek help fast enough. It also found that depressed people took an average of four years from the onset of symptoms to seek help.

Dr Mak adds that depressive symptoms may also be dismissed or downplayed at first, as being part of a normal reaction to an adverse life event or stressor. In other cases, the cause of the depression — such as childhood trauma — may not be as apparent. “All of these may contribute to depression being identified at a much later stage,” he says.

In Lydia’s case, she did not seek help for almost a year after her aunt’s death. “Finally, a friend got me to see a counsellor. At first, I was reluctant and scared of what

others might say if they found out. But my friend persuaded me, and it proved to be a life-changing decision,” she says.

Draining The Pain

What Lydia subsequently found out was that depression is a common illness which can be successfully treated. For most people with moderately severe depression, treatment usually involves the prescription of antidepressant medication.

A type of medicine called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) is most often prescribed by doctors.

“How long a patient will have to take this medication varies from case to case,” says Dr Mak. “It can start from six months for a person with a single episode of depression to up to two years in a person with repeated episodes.”

Antidepressant medicines are generally well-tolerated but occasionally side-effects may occur, says Dr Mak. “Common side effects include dizziness, nausea, restlessness and anxiety. Patients may also experience decreased sex drive and delayed ejaculation in men. Some antidepressant medication can also be dangerous in case of an overdose.”

Treatment usually combines medication with ‘talk-therapy’ sessions such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy to offer the patient a better chance of beating the condition.

“Most patients with depression tend to have negative thinking patterns and beliefs,” says Dr Mak. “This may cause and perpetuate their depression. Undergoing ‘talk therapy’ with a psychologist can help them challenge and change these thought patterns and beliefs.”

The social circumstances of a patient should also be addressed. It is important to identify and, if possible, deal with specific situations or stressors causing and perpetuating a patient’s depression. Ensuring that the patient receives adequate social and emotional support from their family and friends is also important for their recovery, says Dr Mak.

In Lydia’s case, seeing a counsellor was all it took. She did not need medicine.

“My counsellor encouraged me to share my problems. It turned out all I needed was to talk to someone and drain the pain out of my system. I had been falling deeper and deeper into depression because I had kept quiet and refused help,” she recalls.

“In fact, if I hadn’t taken that first step to open up and talk about my troubles, I don’t know how I would have ended up today.” **lw**