

6 Common Myths about Depression

Myth 1: Depression Is Abnormal

“Abnormal” means “out of the ordinary.” To be abnormal something must occur rarely. However, about 10 percent of Australians suffer from depression every year. The annual rate of any mental disorder or addiction is about 20%, and lifetime nearly 50%. The vast majority of normal people do report short periods of depression. It’s hard to argue that something like depression is abnormal when so many people experience it at some point. This is like calling the common cold an abnormal occurrence. Having a cold doesn’t feel good, but it certainly isn’t abnormal.

A different way to think about depression is that it actually plays a key role in healthy living. It signals that your life is not working well. Taking this view about depression makes it easier to stop blaming yourself and get on with changing things that need to be changed and can be changed.

Myth 2: Depression Is an Inevitable Response to Life Stress

Life stress is a trigger for depression about half the time. 25% of clinical depression is really a reaction to some form of setback. Depression is often part of negative life events. When bad events unfold, it’s natural to feel bad. This isn’t unhealthy. It’s the attempt to suppress them or escape from negative feelings that causes problems.

The problem with this myth, that depression is an inevitable response to life stress, is that many people experience life stresses, some devastating, but don’t go on to suffer from depression. This has in part to do with models we observe as children, how we learn to cope. If a parent responds to stress by withdrawing from meals and avoiding conversations, there’s a fair chance the children will try similar coping strategies as adults.

Myth 3: Depression Is About Experiencing Emotions

Depression is as much about NOT feeling as it is about feeling. Depression is free-floating sadness, irritability, and shame, but depression is also an experience of numbness and detachment. Depressed people complain of feeling alone in a room full of people – a state of apathy and disinterest in social activities, often avoiding. Depression may help us avoid feelings.

When you’re depressed, sadness, anger, and tearfulness seem to appear out of the blue – disconnected from the real world, often not the feelings you’d expect to have in the situation. This can happen when you avoid experiencing your emotions in a more direct and grounded way. Because the situations that produce sadness aren’t being addressed, sadness becomes dislodged and starts hunting for a home. Even a minor event can become a lightning rod for these dislodged feelings. Depression is often the emotional result of turning away from and refusing to directly experience unwanted feelings, thoughts, images, or memories.

Myth Four: Depression Is a Biological Illness.

The myth of serotonin deficiency causing depression is believed as dogma by most people, doctors and even psychiatrists. It is scientifically untrue, dozens of studies over decades have proven this. This is not saying that people do not suffer, nor that drugs do not do things, but is fever a paracetamol deficiency? Does a plaster for a broken limb cure a plaster imbalance? Medications numb our feelings, and this can be helpful in the short to medium term.

Depression is an interaction of thoughts, feelings and behaviours that of course affects our biological processes. This does not mean that it is caused by them. The quickest way to alleviate depression is directly focus more effectively managing upon the individuals thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and the context of life that surrounds them. Everything we learn alters our biology, when you have learnt to play the piano your brain has changed, mindfulness practice directly changes our amygdala, frontal cortex, broad brain areas which are also affected by the behaviours we call depression.

Myth five: Medication Is the Best Treatment for Depression

"Antidepressant" medication is actually quite weak in effect size, negligible for the vast majority of depressions, and far less effective than simple behavioural strategies such as mindfulness, exercise for health, and engaging in the things we care about even a tiny bit more day by day. And these latter powerful strategies are helpful in the short, medium and longer term, without troublesome side-effects.

Myth six: Depression Is Something You "Have".

Saying that one "has depression" may seem to absolve responsibility, however as mentioned decades of study show that stigma remained, in fact increased with increased biological beliefs. The idea that depression descends upon us is not consistent with the scientific evidence.

People who develop depression start engaging in depressive behaviours long before the mood symptoms arise. Avoiding potentially unpleasant feelings and avoiding situations that trigger these feelings are 2 types of avoidance that lead to what we call depression. These are not choices that you make, but behaviours that lead to immediate relief, totally understandable and normal, but can worsened things over the long term so incrementally you're not aware of it.

Understanding this leads to possibility for immediate action – learning skills to better handle those difficult thoughts and feelings, and gradually engaging in life you care about.