

# Depression and anxiety disorders in women



## FACT SHEET 13

Good mental health is essential to the overall health of both men and women, but women experience some mental health problems (including depression, anxiety disorders and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) at higher rates than men. In fact, one in five women in Australia will experience depression and one in three women will experience an anxiety disorder during their lifetime.<sup>1</sup>

While similar factors contribute to mental health problems in women and men, some are more likely to affect women. Understanding the risks and knowing the signs and symptoms of depression and anxiety disorders can help you to recognise them in yourself or in others.

The important thing to remember is that effective treatments are available and with the right treatment, most people recover.

## WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

Depression is more than just a low mood — it's a serious illness. People with depression find it hard to function every day and do not enjoy activities that they used to enjoy. Depression has serious effects on both *physical* and *mental* health.

A number of factors can lead to depression. These include:

- family conflict
- isolation or loneliness
- unemployment
- financial hardship
- poor working conditions
- having another illness e.g. diabetes, asthma, arthritis
- excessive drug and alcohol use
- having a family member with depression or an anxiety disorder
- experiences of violence (including emotional, psychological and physical abuse)
- experiences of victimisation, homophobia and discrimination.

It's important to remember that each person is different and it is often a combination of factors that puts a person at risk of depression and anxiety disorders.



## SIGNS OF DEPRESSION

A woman may be experiencing depression if, for **more than two weeks**, she has felt sad, down or miserable most of the time or lost pleasure in most of her usual activities. Common behaviours, thoughts, feelings and physical symptoms associated with depression include:

- stopped going out
- not getting things done at work
- withdrawing from close family members and friends
- relying on alcohol and sedatives or other drugs
- no longer doing things she used to enjoy
- inability to concentrate
- thoughts such as "I'm a failure", "Nothing good ever happens to me", "Life's not worth living"
- feeling overwhelmed, guilty or irritable
- feeling frustrated, unhappy or indecisive
- feeling disappointed, miserable or sad
- headaches and muscle pain
- sleep problems
- loss or change of appetite
- tired all the time
- sick and run down
- significant weight loss or gain.

Everyone experiences some or all of these symptoms from time to time, but when symptoms occur together and are severe or lasting, it's time to seek professional help.

# Depression and anxiety disorders in women

## FACT SHEET 13

### WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Most people feel anxious sometimes, but for people with an anxiety disorder, anxious feelings are overwhelming and cannot be brought under control easily. Having an anxiety disorder is different from feeling stressed. Anxiety disorders are serious conditions that make it hard for the person to manage from day to day.

Anxiety disorders can be part of a woman's genetic make-up, as well as part of her personality. There are many things that can trigger anxiety, such as environment, stressful situations or a trauma. Things that may contribute to an anxiety disorder include genetics (a history of anxiety disorders in the family) or a stressful event (like a family conflict, violence or sexual abuse, or a death). Anxiety disorders are not the same as depression, although the two conditions share many causes and some symptoms.

### SIGNS OF ANXIETY

A person may be experiencing an anxiety disorder if for some time, worry and fear have got in the way of other parts of life — for example at work or in relationships. An anxiety disorder will usually be far more intense than normal anxiety and go on for weeks, months or even longer. An anxiety disorder can be expressed in different ways, such as uncontrollable worry, intense fear (phobias or panic attacks), upsetting dreams or flashbacks of a traumatic event.

Anxiety disorders include Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Panic Disorder (with or without agoraphobia), Specific Phobias and Social Phobia. For a comprehensive list of anxiety disorder symptoms and fact sheets about the different types of anxiety disorders, go to the *beyondblue* website [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) or call the *beyondblue* info line **1300 22 4636**.

### FACTORS THAT CAN CONTRIBUTE TO DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY IN WOMEN

Major life events such as pregnancy, motherhood and menopause can create major stresses for some women, while negative life experiences such as poverty, discrimination, violence, unemployment and isolation can also impact on women's mental health and well-being. Gender roles and unequal economic and social relations between men and women in our community may also contribute to women's higher risk of depression.

Life events and situations that are linked to depression and anxiety include the following:

- **Pregnancy (antenatal)** — Almost 10 per cent of Australian women experience anxiety or depression during pregnancy.<sup>2</sup> This can be a reaction to the pregnancy itself, to associated health issues or to other major life stresses.
- **Having a baby and becoming a mother (postnatal)** — It's not uncommon for women to experience depression and anxiety after the birth of a baby – postnatal depression is experienced by around 16 per cent of women during the first year after the birth.<sup>2</sup> Adjusting to this major life change, as well as coping with the day-to-day stresses of motherhood, can make some women more likely to experience depression or anxiety at this time, particularly if they've experienced depression or anxiety in the past.
- **Menopause** — Hormone changes in menopause do not cause depression, but seem to cause mood swings and irritability. This can make life difficult at a time when a woman may also be experiencing changes in her body. Women who experience surgical or early menopause can be at greater risk of depression.<sup>3</sup>
- **Caring for family members** who are unwell or unable to look after themselves — Over half of the carers in Australia are women. Women are also much more likely to provide the majority of help to a person with a disability. Caring for others can affect the caregiver's *physical* and *mental* health.
- **Violence or abuse** — For a woman to maintain good mental health and well-being it's important for her to feel safe and respected in her relationships. Experiences of violence and assault as well as emotional, physical and sexual abuse can have harmful effects on women, including depression and anxiety disorders, drug and alcohol misuse, suicidal thoughts or suicide attempts and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In this situation, it is important for women to remember that they are not responsible for the abusive behaviour of others.
- **Eating disorders** — Women are more likely than men to experience anorexia or bulimia, which affect about 2 to 3 per cent of women in Australia.<sup>4</sup> Eating disorders are mental illnesses and share many risk factors with depression. Many women who have an eating disorder will also experience depression and/or an anxiety disorder at some point in their lives.

- **Same-sex attraction** — Research in Australia and overseas shows that lesbian and bisexual women experience anxiety disorders and depression at higher rates than heterosexual women and are at greater risk of suicide and self-harm because they may experience discrimination, bullying and abuse.<sup>5</sup> The risk of mental health problems is greater for these women if they do not have family or community support.
- **Significant changes in living arrangements** — Women who are separated, divorced or widowed are more likely to have mental health problems, including depression and anxiety disorders.<sup>1</sup> Strategies that have helped women in this situation to avoid mental health problems include talking to people about how they're feeling and asking for help when they need it.

## WHAT KINDS OF HELP ARE AVAILABLE FOR ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION?

Whatever the reason for mental health problems, it's important to seek help as soon as possible. Many women feel embarrassed or feel that they're letting the family down if they admit to having depression or an anxiety disorder. But women should remember that mental health problems are both common and treatable. A doctor or other health professional will be able to help a woman decide whether treatment is needed and what treatments are suitable.

Different types of depression and anxiety disorders require different types of treatment and support. This may range from physical exercise for preventing and treating mild depression, through to psychological treatments for anxiety disorders and a combination of psychological and drug treatments for more severe levels of depression and anxiety disorders that are not responding to psychological treatments.

Psychological treatments not only help with recovery, but can also help to prevent a recurrence of depression or anxiety disorders.

- **Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)** is an effective treatment for people with depression and anxiety. It teaches people to think realistically about common difficulties, helping them to change their thought patterns and the way they react to certain situations.
- **Interpersonal Therapy (IPT)** is also an effective treatment for depression. It helps people find new ways to get along with others and to resolve losses, changes and conflict in relationships.



Antidepressant medication is often prescribed, alongside psychological treatments, when a person experiences a moderate to severe episode of depression and/or anxiety. Sometimes antidepressants are also prescribed when other treatments have not been helpful.

Making a decision about which antidepressant is best for a person can be complex. This decision should be made in consultation with a doctor after careful assessment and consideration. The prescribing health professional should discuss differences in effects and possible side-effects of medications.

There are many different types of antidepressant medication. The doctor may need to find the medication and dose which is most effective for the person. Keep in mind antidepressants take time before they start to help (at least two weeks).

Like any medication, the length of time for which a person takes antidepressants depends on the severity of the illness and how the person responds to treatment. For some people, antidepressants are needed only for a short time (generally six to 12 months) with psychological treatments and self-help techniques being sufficient. For others, antidepressants are needed on an ongoing basis – in the same way that someone with asthma would use respiratory medication.

Stopping medication should only be done gradually, on a doctor's recommendation and under supervision.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (Australia's regulatory agency for medical drugs) and the manufacturers of antidepressants do not recommend antidepressant use for treating depression in young people under the age of 18. For more information see *beyondblue* **Fact sheet 11 – Antidepressant medication**.



## HOW TO GET THE RIGHT TREATMENT

- **Be proactive** — As with most physical health problems, the earlier a person gets help, the faster they can recover. That's why it's very important to get help at the first sign of any problems. If you know a woman experiencing the symptoms of depression or an anxiety disorder, she may not have the motivation to seek help herself, so be proactive on her behalf in discussing or seeking help with her.
- **Be clear and direct** — It's important to give the GP or mental health professional the full picture. It's a good idea to write down feelings or questions before your visit, which makes you less likely to forget to tell the doctor the important things. It may be useful to take a completed depression or anxiety checklist along, such as those on the *beyondblue* website (see [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au), click [Symptom Checklists](#)).
- **Be persistent** — It's very important to find the right mental health professional. If you don't feel comfortable with a GP or other health professional, or suspect your mental health isn't being managed effectively, choose another doctor or get a second opinion.
- **Be prepared to follow the treatment plan** — For some people, it can take a while before they feel well again. It's important for your long-term recovery that you stick with treatment plans and let the doctor know when things aren't working or if you are experiencing side-effects.



## WHERE TO GET HELP

A **General Practitioner (GP)** is a good person with whom to discuss your concerns in the first instance. Your GP will be able to conduct or arrange any necessary medical tests, provide treatment or refer you to a mental health professional. It is recommended that you go to your regular GP or another GP in the same clinic as they will have access to your medical file. If you don't have a regular GP or clinic, a list of GPs with expertise in treating common mental health problems is available at [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) – click [Find a Doctor or other Mental Health Practitioner](#) or call the *beyondblue* info line on **1300 22 4636** (local call cost from a landline).

**Psychologists** can assist people who are having difficulty controlling their emotions, thinking and behaviour. Clinical psychologists are specialists in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of mental illness such as depression, anxiety and related disorders. For a list of psychologists with expertise in treating mental health problems, visit [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) and click [Find a Doctor or other Mental Health Practitioner](#) or call the *beyondblue* info line on **1300 22 4636** (local call cost from a landline).

**Psychiatrists** are doctors who have undergone specialist training to treat all mental disorders. They can make medical and psychological assessments, conduct medical tests and prescribe medication. Depending on their expertise and type of practice, they can also provide psychological treatments such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and Interpersonal Therapy (IPT). Some have particular areas of speciality. If you would like a consultation with a psychiatrist you will need a referral from your GP.

**Mental health nurses** are specially trained to care for people with mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and related disorders. They work with psychiatrists and GPs to review a person's mental health, monitor medication and provide information about mental health problems and treatment. Some have training in psychological therapies. If you would like a referral to a mental health nurse who works in a general practice, ask your GP.

**Social workers in mental health** are specially trained to work with people who are experiencing difficulties in their life. Social workers can support people with depression, anxiety and related disorders by helping them find ways to manage more effectively some of the situations that trigger these disorders, such as family issues, financial problems, work stress and living arrangements.

Mental health social workers can also provide focused psychological self-help strategies. For a list of social workers with expertise in managing depression, anxiety and related disorders, visit [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) and click [Find a Doctor or other Mental Health Practitioner](#) or call the *beyondblue* info line on **1300 22 4636** (local call cost from a landline).

**Occupational therapists in mental health** help people who have difficulties functioning because of a mental health problem (such as anxiety or depression) to participate in normal, everyday activities. Mental health occupational therapists can also provide focused psychological self-help strategies. For a list of occupational therapists with expertise in managing depression, anxiety and related disorders visit [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) and click [Find a Doctor or other Mental Health Practitioner](#) or call the *beyondblue* info line **1300 22 4636** (local call cost from a landline).

**Specialist sexual assault and domestic and family violence services** provide specific responses to violence against women. These service providers can act as an advocate to explore safety issues and responses to violence while providing specialist counselling support.

If a GP or psychiatrist refers you to a clinical psychologist, registered psychologist, mental health nurse, social worker or occupational therapist in mental health, a Medicare rebate can be claimed for part of the cost. If the mental health practitioner bulk-bills, there will be no upfront charge or out of pocket expenses. For more information see *beyondblue* **Fact sheet 24 – Help for depression, anxiety and related disorders under Medicare.**



*Talking to a General Practitioner is a good first step in getting help for depression/anxiety disorders.*

### Finding a mental health practitioner

For a list of health professionals with expertise in treating depression and anxiety disorders, go to the *beyondblue* website [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) and click on [Find a doctor or other Mental Health Practitioner](#) or call the *beyondblue* info line on 1300 22 4636 (local call cost from a landline).

## HELPFUL TIPS FOR MANAGING DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY DISORDERS

- Speak to a doctor or other health professional about your concerns and discuss treatment options.
- Accept help, support and encouragement from family members and friends.
- Reduce isolation by becoming involved in social activities.
- Exercise regularly. (See *beyondblue* online **Fact sheet 8 – Keeping active.**)
- Eat healthily and include a wide variety of nutritious foods. (See *beyondblue* online **Fact sheet 30 – Healthy eating for people with depression, anxiety and related disorders.**)
- Achieve and maintain a healthy weight.
- Get enough sleep. (See *beyondblue* online **Fact sheet 7 – Sleeping well.**)
- Limit alcohol intake (See *beyondblue* **Fact sheet 9 – Reducing alcohol and other drugs.**)
- Allow yourself time to relax and reduce your stress. (See *beyondblue* online **Fact sheet 6 – Reducing stress.**)
- Keep a check on your physical health.
- Exercise your rights. We all have the right to be treated fairly and equally. If you feel that you are not being treated fairly or equally because of sexual or gender prejudice, or a mental health problem, speak up or ask someone you trust to advocate for you. (See *beyondblue* **Fact sheet 40 – Depression and anxiety in gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people.**)

### THINGS TO REMEMBER

- Help is available and with the right treatment, most people recover from depression and/or anxiety disorders.
- Be careful not to dismiss signs and symptoms of mental health problems in yourself because you are too busy caring for others.
- It's important to seek help early – the sooner the better.

# Depression and anxiety disorders in women



## FACT SHEET 13

### MORE INFORMATION

#### Anxiety Online

[www.anxietyonline.org.au](http://www.anxietyonline.org.au)

Information and 'virtual' treatment clinic for people with anxiety disorders

#### Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health (ACPMH)

[www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au)

Information on post-traumatic mental health problems and general advice about treatment

#### Australian Women's Health Network

[www.awhn.org.au](http://www.awhn.org.au)

Details of women's health services in each state and territory

#### beyondblue

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

1300 22 4636 or

[infoline@beyondblue.org.au](mailto:infoline@beyondblue.org.au)

Information on depression, anxiety and related disorders, available treatments and where to get help

#### Breast Cancer Network Australia

1800 500 258

[www.bcna.org.au](http://www.bcna.org.au)

Information and resources for people whose lives have been affected by breast cancer

#### The Butterfly Foundation

1800 33 4673

[www.thebutterflyfoundation.org.au](http://www.thebutterflyfoundation.org.au)

Support and referral for people with eating disorders and their families (national)

#### Carers Australia

1800 242 636 (free call from landlines)

[www.carersaustralia.com.au](http://www.carersaustralia.com.au)

Family carer support and counselling in each state and territory

#### CRUFAD Clinical Research Unit for Anxiety and Depression

[www.crufad.org](http://www.crufad.org)

Information and internet-based education and treatment programs for people with anxiety or depression

#### Jean Hailes Foundation for Women's Health

[www.jeanhailes.org.au](http://www.jeanhailes.org.au)

Health information, research and services for Australian women

#### Kids Helpline

1800 55 1800

[www.kidshelpline.com.au](http://www.kidshelpline.com.au)

Counselling for children and young people aged 5 to 25

#### Lifeline

13 11 14

National 24-hour telephone counselling service for the cost of a local call

#### likeitis

[www.likeitis.org.au/sexuality/helplines](http://www.likeitis.org.au/sexuality/helplines)

Online details of gay and lesbian telephone help lines in each state and territory

#### Mental Health in Multicultural Australia (MHIMA)

(07) 3167 8306

Provides advice and support on mental health and suicide prevention for Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and mental health support services

#### National Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Helpline

1800 200 526

Confidential 24-hour phone counselling

#### National LGBTI Health Alliance

[www.lgbthealth.org.au](http://www.lgbthealth.org.au)

Information and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other sexuality, sex and gender diverse people (LGBTI)

#### Parent helplines

VIC 13 22 89

NSW 1300 1300 52

QLD 1300 30 1300

NT 1300 30 1300

WA 1800 654 432

SA 1300 364 100

TAS 1300 808 178

ACT 02 6287 3833

#### Relationships Australia

1300 364 277

[www.relationships.org.au](http://www.relationships.org.au)

Support and counselling for relationships

#### Suicide Call Back Service

1300 659 467

[www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au](http://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au)

Telephone support for those at risk of suicide, their carers and those bereaved by suicide

#### Youthbeyondblue

[www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com)

beyondblue's website for young people – information on depression and anxiety and how to help a friend

beyondblue

Info line 1300 22 4636 or [infoline@beyondblue.org.au](mailto:infoline@beyondblue.org.au)  
[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

© Beyond Blue Ltd

1 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) *2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results* (4326.0), Canberra, ABS

2 Perinatal Mental Health Consortium (2008) *National Action Plan for Perinatal Mental Health 2008-2010 Full Report*. beyondblue: national depression initiative.

3 Jean Hailes Foundation for Women's Health, Fact Sheet – Early Menopause and Emotional Wellbeing, Available at: [www.jeanhailes.org.au](http://www.jeanhailes.org.au)

4 Victorian Centre of Excellence in Eating Disorders & Eating Disorders Foundation of Victoria (2004) *An Eating Disorders Resource for Schools. A Manual to Promote Early Intervention and Prevention of Eating Disorders in Schools*.

5 Hillier L, Turner A et al (2005) *Writing themselves in again – 6 years on: the second national report on the sexuality, health and wellbeing of same sex attracted young people*. Melbourne: Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society, La Trobe University.