

Coping with Depression



Spinal cord injury is one of the most difficult health events you can experience. Suddenly, your life changes. The injury changes not only how you move about and how you function physically, but also how you live, how you work and even how you relate to others. Perhaps the most difficult change to accept is your increased need to depend on others.

It's natural to experience sadness, anger, sorrow, or anxiety. These are normal reactions and part of grieving the losses that result from your spinal cord injury.

However, a more severe or prolonged reaction may be a sign that you are suffering from a depressive disorder. This brochure is about such illness, and especially about preventing and overcoming it.



What is depression?

We've all felt sad, blue or down at different times in our lives. This is a normal, healthy reaction to life's problems, losses and disappointments. A depressed mood will usually lift when circumstances improve or as we learn to adjust.

But if a depressed mood persists, causes significant emotional distress or interferes with our ability to function, it may indicate the development of a depressive disorder. A depressive disorder (sometimes called "clinical depression") is a serious mental health problem – a medical condition that, left untreated, can result in significant disability.

Depressive disorders are relatively common. According to research, 10-15% of Canadian men and 15-25% of Canadian women experience a major depressive episode at least once in their lifetime.

In addition to feeling down, a depressed person is likely to experience some of the following symptoms:

Physical symptoms

- Loss of appetite and weight (or in some cases, eating too much)
- Difficulties in falling or staying asleep (or in some cases, sleeping too much)
- Slowed speech or movements (or in some cases, restlessness and agitation)
- Fatigue, tiredness, and loss of energy



Psychological symptoms

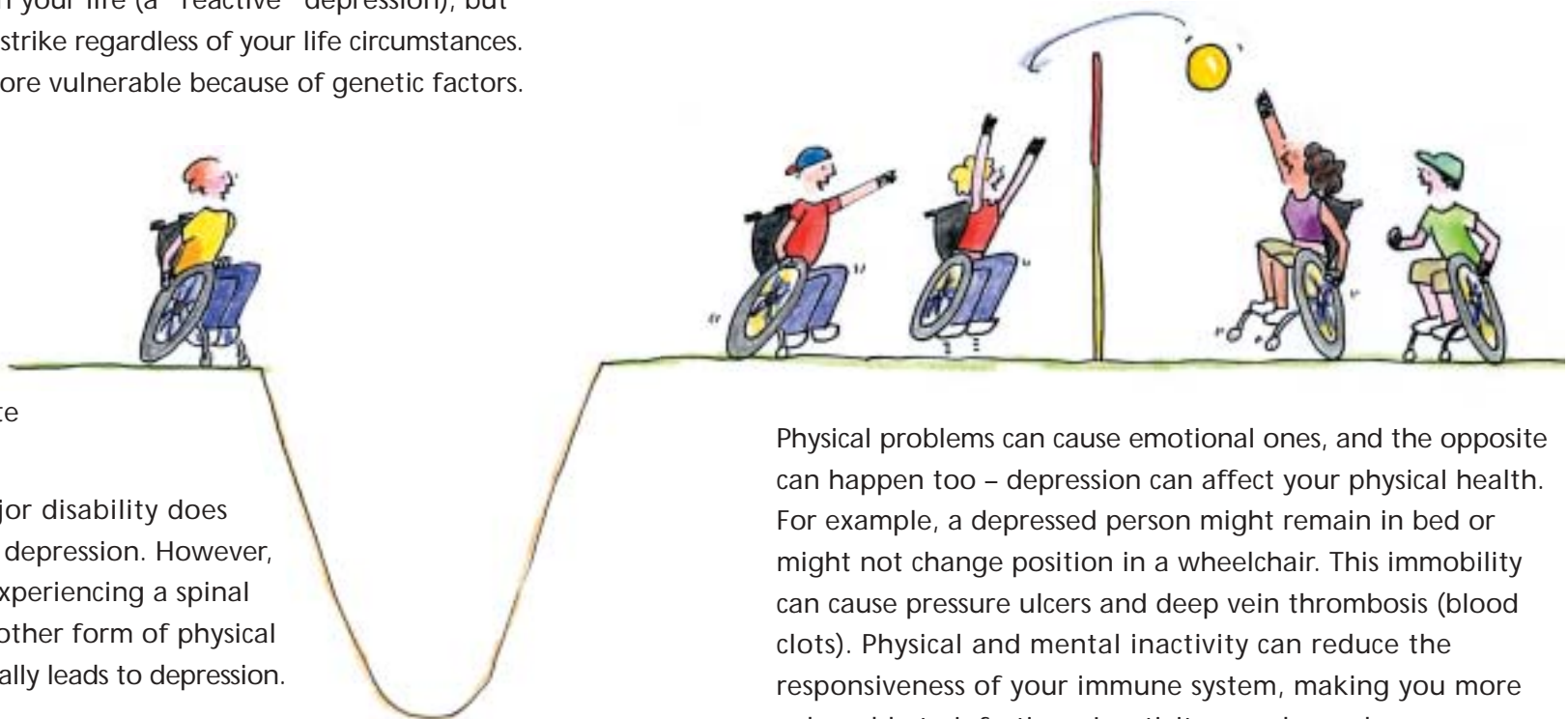
- Difficulties in concentrating, thinking and making decisions
- Feeling worthless or guilty
- Death wishes or thoughts about suicide

Sometimes it can be difficult to tell the difference between being physically ill and being depressed. Illness and some medications may rob you of energy and sleep, leading to symptoms that can be misinterpreted as depression. Always discuss worrisome symptoms with a doctor or another specialized health professional.

What causes depression?

You can become clinically depressed as a reaction to stress or difficult events in your life (a "reactive" depression), but depression can also strike regardless of your life circumstances. Some people are more vulnerable because of genetic factors. Certain medical illnesses, psychiatric disorders, or even medications can cause depression. Sometimes, alcohol or recreational drugs can contribute to depression.

Experiencing a major disability does increase the risk of depression. However, it is not true that experiencing a spinal cord injury, or any other form of physical disability, automatically leads to depression.



We are all unique as individuals, coping with loss and change in our own way. There is no "normal" period of completing the grieving process or adapting to life with disability. But sometimes the grieving process can lead to clinical depression – when, for example, we feel overwhelmed by our losses and by the number of changes required to live with disability.

Depression can emerge at any time in the lifespan. People living with spinal cord injuries often experience physical problems such as pain, spasms, urinary tract infections, or skin breakdown. These can cause fatigue and sleep disturbances that can contribute to emotional difficulties. That's why, when you learn to manage pain and spasms and to prevent medical complications, you're protecting both your physical and your emotional health.

Physical problems can cause emotional ones, and the opposite can happen too – depression can affect your physical health. For example, a depressed person might remain in bed or might not change position in a wheelchair. This immobility can cause pressure ulcers and deep vein thrombosis (blood clots). Physical and mental inactivity can reduce the responsiveness of your immune system, making you more vulnerable to infections. Inactivity can also make spasms and pain worse.

What can you do to prevent depression?

A good strategy for preventing depression should involve creating a safe yet challenging environment for yourself, and enlisting support from others.

Your environment

- Create a comfortable, safe environment where you feel at ease, both physically and emotionally. Be scrupulous about your personal care routines and about taking your prescribed medication. Keep your essential equipment, such as wheelchair, braces, mattress and wheelchair cushion, in good shape.



Yourself

- Stay intellectually curious and active through work, study, hobbies and volunteering. These activities give our lives purpose and stimulate our bodies and minds. But pay attention to how you feel – set a manageable pace for your life. Look after your physical health – be sure to get restful sleep, a balanced diet, and regular physical exercise. Exercise can be a very effective antidepressant!
- Reserve time for yourself and for your interests. Learn about relaxation methods and other strategies for managing stress (such as meditation, yoga or tai chi). Try to understand and accept the changes that life brings.
- Learn about emotional health and depression by reading books and seeking information on the Internet, but be sure to verify all medical information with a doctor.

Your support system

- Look after your personal relationships, trying to strike a healthy balance between meeting your needs and those of others. Communicate openly and regularly with supportive friends and family members.
- Get involved with organizations that deal with spinal cord injury issues, and stay in touch with your peers.



Does depression require treatment?

Depression is an illness that will usually respond to treatment. Just as with most physical illnesses, the sooner you begin treatment, the sooner you'll get better.

When not treated, depression can affect both your physical health and the way you relate to others. It can be hard to function at home and at work. When this happens, depressed people start feeling useless and guilty, especially when others criticize or fail to understand them. If these feelings of helplessness and hopelessness become overwhelming, suicidal thoughts can emerge and can lead to a suicidal plan.

It is vital to break this vicious cycle of depression as early as possible. Depression distorts your thinking and judgment. Everything appears more bleak and hopeless. It is not a time to be making the irreversible decision to end your life. If you have been struggling with suicidal thoughts, keep in mind that they might persist for a while after your depression has lifted.

Even people with reactive depression, who might improve without treatment if their life circumstances improve, can benefit from treatment: they'll regain emotional balance more quickly and prevent their depression from worsening. On the other hand, some types of depressive disorders are long-lasting or recurrent, and require ongoing treatment.

How can depression be treated?

A family physician, physiatrist, neurologist, psychiatrist or psychologist can diagnose depression and discuss treatment options with you. Available treatments include counselling, psychotherapy, and antidepressant medication. Most people find that a combination of treatments works best.

Psychotherapy and counselling

You can get psychotherapy or counselling for depression from trained mental health professionals such as physicians, psychologists, or social workers.

Psychotherapy and counselling can help you build confidence and provide you with tools to deal with difficulties. It's a chance to share your hopes and worries openly without

the fear of being judged. Your mental health professional will help you sort out your thoughts, resolve problems, and make plans for the future.

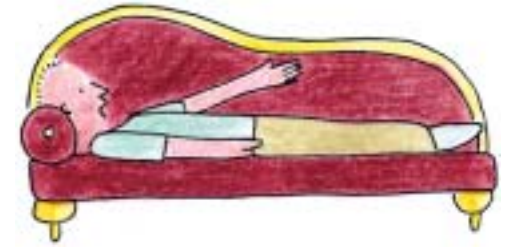
You'll also learn strategies for dealing with depressive symptoms and for preventing them in the future.

Antidepressant medications

There are many different types and brands of antidepressants. People respond differently to these medications, so you may have to try several different types before you find the best one(s) for you. Some antidepressants may take up to six weeks to show results. Be patient! It is critical to take your medication regularly and to continue with the treatment until all symptoms are gone. Depending on your response to medication, your doctor may need to adjust the dosage or change the medication. Talk to your doctor about when to stop drug therapy. If you don't take your medication regularly, or if you stop it too early, the illness is likely to return.



For a small number of people, antidepressant drugs can make symptoms worse rather than better. This reaction, when it occurs, usually happens within the first few weeks of treatment or after doses have been adjusted. If this happens to you, consult your physician immediately. Do not stop



taking the medication before talking to your physician or pharmacist, since sudden withdrawal from some medications may cause complications.

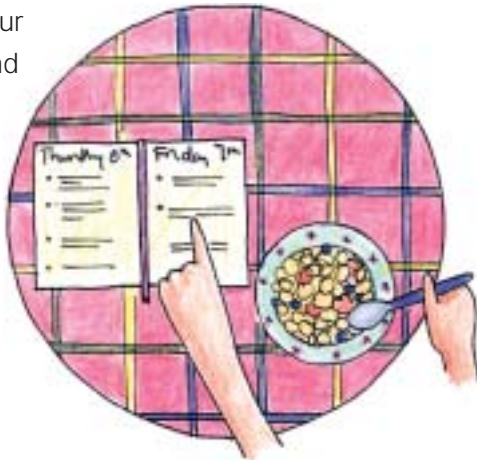
Some antidepressants are incompatible with each other, with some herbal remedies or with some over-the-counter medications. Be sure to keep your doctor and pharmacist informed about all products that you use and about any changes in your medical condition.

What should you do if you feel depression emerging?

Look after your health

When you are feeling depressed, it is particularly important to maintain your daily routines and to look after your basic health needs. Doing so will require extra effort. Therefore, it may be helpful to:

- Set up a plan or schedule of activities for every day and follow it, even if you have to use a checklist.
- Develop a plan for dealing with problems, too. When stress and problems mount, don't procrastinate. Identify your most pressing problem and decide what to do about it, and when to do it.



Avoid alcohol use

Avoid using alcohol to treat depression. Alcohol use, particularly when combined with some medications, can make depression much worse.

Ask for help

- Let others know when you need help. Talk to health professionals, clergy, teachers, peers, family and friends. Discussing problems can help clarify issues and identify creative solutions.
- Before depression spirals out of control, make a firm, independent decision to seek help, to start treatment and to complete it.
- If you want to talk to a professional who is knowledgeable about the effects of spinal cord injury on psychological and social adjustment, contact Toronto Rehab's Lyndhurst Centre (416-597-3422). Ask for Outpatient Nursing (Ext. 6064), Outpatient Psychology (Ext. 6272), or Outpatient Social Work (Ext. 6215).
- Depression can lead to urgent situations where suicidal thoughts become life threatening. Seek help immediately in such a case. See a physician, visit a hospital emergency department, call your local distress centre (in Toronto, 416-408-4357) or, if necessary, call 911 (Emergency Medical Services).



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595 Bay Street, Suite 401, P.O. Box 53 Toronto, ON M5G 2C2
Tel. 416-408-4252 Toll free: 1-866-308-7722 Fax. 416-408-4235
www.gluckstein.com



Toronto Rehabilitation
Institute
*A University of Toronto
Teaching and
Research Hospital*

Lyndhurst Centre
520 Sutherland Drive Toronto, Ontario M4G 3V9
Tel: 416-597-3422, ext. 6000 Fax: 416-422-5216
www.torontorehab.com

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