

Depression

Depression is a gendered condition: women are twice as likely to experience it as men, and 1 in 4 women suffer from depression at some point in their lives. Anti-depressants are widely prescribed and commonly known, yet they are by no means the only treatment available for depression. Continue reading for a brief outline of what depression is, different views of what causes it and how it can be treated, as well as resources on the condition available at the VWHC and in your community.

Are you depressed?

The symptoms of depression can include loss of self-esteem, feelings that life isn't worthwhile, forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating, loss of interest in activities/people/sex, change in appetite or sleeping patterns, and suicidal thoughts. If you think you might be experiencing depression, the first step is to talk to someone about it. You can also see a counsellor or visit your family doctor. The Vancouver Women's Health Collective can help you find a suitable doctor and/or counsellor.

Why do people get depressed?

No one is sure exactly what causes depression. Some women experience depression during or after a major life event, such as illness, childbirth, or the end of a relationship. Other times, depression occurs with no related life changes. The way each person interprets the causes of depression can depend on whether they see depression as a medical condition, or if they view it from a more holistic point of view. Some causes may include:

- fluctuating estrogen levels
- high stress
- social isolation
- chemical imbalance in the brain
- genetic predisposition

Medical treatment

Depending on each doctor or therapist's perspective on depression, they can approach its treatment in different ways. Practitioners who follow a medical based model of mental health and depression often treat the condition with anti-depressant drugs. They classify depression into one of several categories: clinical depression (most common), bi-polar disorder, postpartum depression, or psychosis. While anti-depressants can quickly improve the symptoms of depression, many can cause side effects, including headaches, nausea, weight gain, loss of sexual interest, and an increase in the patient's risk of suicide when they begin taking the medication. Side effects can also occur when the patient stops taking the medication.

Alternative views

Some therapists and holistic practitioners see depression from a different perspective. They believe that depression is not so much the result of a chemical imbalance, but of the challenges so many women face in their lives. Emotional health is affected by physical and spiritual health,

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Titbits...on women's health

and because we often live with high levels of stress and have experienced violence or other forms of oppression, it is not surprising that so many women face depression at some point in their lives. Getting active in your community and/or joining a women's group can be good ways to improve your mental health. In addition, many of us don't feel that we have time to take proper care of our bodies. Many basic lifestyle changes can improve depression - eating well, getting enough sleep, and exercising can all help you feel healthier and happier. In fact, exercise is a proven mood enhancer because it releases endorphins into the bloodstream, and combined with short-term counselling it has been proven to effectively deal with depression.

Feminist therapy

Feminist therapy focuses on empowering women and establishing a solid relationship of trust between patient and counsellor/therapist. Feminist practitioners are usually more interested in helping a woman to articulate her feelings and life situation, rather than prescribing medication, and have an awareness of the many different social issues that can present challenges in an individual woman's life. Please keep in mind that not all female practitioners practice feminist therapy.

Check out these resources at the VWHC

The Vancouver Women's Health Collective maintains extensive information on a variety of health issues and conditions in our Health Files. You can find the files on depression in the Mental Health section. We also have several books in our library which deal with women and mental health, feminist therapy, anti-depressants, the pharmaceutical industry, and other issues related to depression. The collective maintains files and evaluations on family doctors, therapists, and psychiatrists who are accepting new patients, which you can search through if you are looking for a new doctor or therapist. The VWHC regularly hosts support groups and workshops about various topics. Let us know if you'd like to be informed about an upcoming depression support group, or if you'd like to help in organizing one.

Resources in your community

Vancouver Crisis Centre – provides 24 hour a day crisis counselling - 604-872-3311

Canadian Mental Health Association – 604-987-6959

Pacific Postpartum Society – 604-255-7999

Mood Disorders Service at UBC Hospital - 604-822-7512

Websites worth visiting

- Vancouver Women's Health Collective – www.womenshealthcollective.ca
- Mood Disorders Association of BC – www.mdabc.ca
- Women's Web: Strategies for living with depression, information on support groups and starting your own - www.womensweb.ca/mental/depression
- Women's Health Matters: Information on a variety of mental health issues and hosts a discussion group on depression - www.womenshealthmatters.ca

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