

# Depression and Parkinson's

**S**ome people with Parkinson's may be affected by depression during the course of their condition.

**This information sheet explains what the symptoms of depression are and what causes it. It also describes how depression can be treated and gives details of where to find more information and advice.**

## What is depression?

Depression is an illness that is usually diagnosed when someone has feelings of extreme sadness for a long period of time, although some people experience a sense of emotional 'emptiness', rather than sadness. These feelings may affect someone's ability to carry out day-to-day activities.

Depression is more than temporary feelings of sadness, unhappiness or frustration. A person who is depressed will typically have one or both of the following two symptoms:

- lack of interest in or pleasure from usual activities
- feeling down or hopeless

It's rare to experience all of the following symptoms, but if you are depressed you might also have:

- difficulty in concentrating
- low energy and tiredness
- trouble sleeping (waking in the early hours of the morning can be a classic sign) or excessive sleeping
- a loss of appetite, usually connected with weight loss, but sometimes also increased appetite and weight gain
- decreased sexual energy
- feelings of worthlessness

“ I have not suffered from serious depression, but I have certainly experienced the desire to just do nothing and to sink into apathy. ”

**Caroline, diagnosed in 2003**

- in severe cases, thoughts of death, suicidal ideas and thoughts of self-harm

For more information, see the NHS website [www.nhs.uk/conditions/depression](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/depression)

## Do I have depression?

If you are experiencing some of these symptoms, it won't necessarily mean you are depressed. Try to keep in mind that many of these things can be common symptoms of Parkinson's.

For example, many people with Parkinson's experience sleep and night-time problems. These difficulties will probably make you feel tired and lacking in energy, but they don't necessarily mean you're depressed.

**Find out more:** see our information sheet [Sleep and night-time problems in Parkinson's](#).

Fatigue, which can be described as an overwhelming sense of tiredness, can also be a symptom of both Parkinson's and depression.

**Find out more:** see our information sheet [Fatigue and Parkinson's](#).

You may experience ups and downs in your mood because of the changing nature of your Parkinson's symptoms throughout the day. These changes in mood aren't necessarily a sign of depression.

With the above in mind, it's very important to speak to your GP, specialist or Parkinson's nurse (if you have one) if you suspect you may be depressed. This will allow you to get an accurate diagnosis.

## What causes depression in Parkinson's?

There are several possible causes of depression in Parkinson's.

Some research has suggested that a lack of the chemical dopamine, which causes the symptoms of Parkinson's, can be a trigger for depression.

Depression can be related to genetics, so if you have a family history of depression, you are more likely to experience depression yourself.

Being diagnosed with Parkinson's can be very stressful and upsetting for many reasons and the condition can have an impact on every aspect of life. As their Parkinson's symptoms progress, some people may find that they have to give up certain activities that are important to them.

How a person responds and reacts to the effects of their condition will probably depend on their personality, general attitudes and their life circumstances. But it's completely understandable that some people will sometimes experience feelings of depression because of Parkinson's.

## Other causes of depression-like symptoms

Whether you have Parkinson's or not, depression could also be related to other physical conditions, such as thyroid abnormalities, nutritional deficiencies (such as low vitamin B12 and folate levels) or anaemia. Speak to your GP, specialist or Parkinson's nurse about any concerns.

It may also be possible that you are under-medicated for the physical symptoms of Parkinson's – or depression could be a side-effect from other drugs. Again, it is best to speak to your healthcare professional about this.

Alcohol can be a depressant, so drinking too much can cause low moods and affect your sleeping pattern.

Whatever the cause for your depression, it is important to try not to feel too distressed about why you feel the way you do.

Depression, like any illness, can affect anyone at any time. It is no-one's fault, and it is not a sign of weakness.

The important thing is that you speak to a healthcare professional about your feelings, so that an accurate diagnosis can be made and you can get the most appropriate treatment for you.

## What can be done about depression?

Depression is a treatable condition and there are several ways this can be done. Treatments should be introduced step by step, starting with the simplest measures.

Firstly, it is very important to make sure that your Parkinson's symptoms are as well controlled as possible.

### Treating Parkinson's symptoms

If you are experiencing feelings of depression, it may help to have changes made to your Parkinson's medication. Speak to your GP, specialist or Parkinson's nurse about how your Parkinson's medication could be adjusted to help manage your depression.

There is some limited evidence to suggest that some dopamine agonists may improve a person's mood as well as any mobility problems. But there can be side effects, so this treatment might not be an option for everyone.

After your Parkinson's medication is adjusted appropriately, depression may be treated, depending upon the severity of your symptoms and what has helped in the past (if you have been depressed before).

### What can I do to help myself?

Although you should seek advice from healthcare professionals, there are a number of things you can do that may help you feel a bit better.

You may find it helpful to get a better understanding of depression. Try contacting other organisations that provide information, such as those listed on pages 5 and 6. They may be able to provide guides about how you can help yourself to manage depression. This is a recommended way of helping mild depression.

It's important to try and find ways to relax. You could try complementary therapies such as massage or exercises such as t'ai chi or yoga.

**Find out more:** see our booklet *Complementary therapies and Parkinson's*.

Do note that the herbal remedy St John's Wort, which can be used for depression, is not recommended for people with certain other health problems, including Parkinson's. It can have a number of significant side effects, and potentially serious interactions with other medications.

See page 6 for details of how to find more resources on depression.

**Sleep** – Make sure you go to bed at the same time each night, and have regular sleep hours. Try not to eat or drink too much before going to sleep. Also try to have a regular routine for getting up in the morning. Smoking should be avoided, and regular exercise should help you sleep better.

**Exercise** – Research has shown gentle exercise to be very beneficial for depression. Swimming, walking and cycling are low-impact sports that can be done alone or with a friend.

**Find out more:** see our exercise DVD and booklet *Keeping moving*.

A structured physical activity programme may be useful. Exercise referral schemes may be organised in your local area through your local council or sports centre. Speak to your GP about getting a referral.

Speak to your GP, specialist or Parkinson's nurse about what may be suitable for you.

### Can counselling help?

A professional counsellor can work with you to try to understand any underlying issues that may be contributing to your depression.

Counsellors may also be trained in other psychological therapies and could possibly apply different techniques. It's always a good idea to ask about qualifications and experience before making decisions of who to get help from. Some GP practices have a counsellor, or your GP can refer you.

## Cognitive behavioural therapy

For more persistent or significant depression, group therapy or individual therapy using cognitive behavioural techniques can be useful. This is a therapy designed to change your everyday thoughts and behaviour to help improve your emotions and lift depression. It looks at how you think about yourself, your environment and the people around you, and how these thoughts affect your mood and behaviour.

Cognitive behavioural therapists may be clinical psychologists, psychiatrists or specially trained nurses. Your therapist will try to teach you new skills to help deal with negative thoughts and problems more effectively. Techniques used include relaxation, distraction and goal setting. Cognitive behavioural therapy usually involves a course of weekly sessions.

Some GPs also provide access to a computerized cognitive behaviour therapy course called 'Beating the Blues'. There is also an online course that anyone with a computer and internet access can use, called 'MoodGYM' [www.moodgym.anu.edu.au](http://www.moodgym.anu.edu.au)

Speak to your GP, specialist or Parkinson's nurse for more information about the help available in your area.

If you want to make your own enquiries about cognitive behaviour therapy or counselling services in your area, you could try contacting the British Psychological Society or the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. You can find their contact details on page 6.

## Antidepressants

Antidepressants are not recommended for the routine treatment of mild depression, unless you have not benefited from the above measures, or if your symptoms persist.

Antidepressants can be used to treat moderate to severe depression. They work by stimulating chemicals in the brain.

There are three main types of antidepressant. Some will be more suitable for you than others – it depends on your symptoms and what other medications you're taking.

“When I first started to experience some of the symptoms of Parkinson's, I struggled with depression. I judged myself severely for taking such a long time to get ready in the morning.”

**Karl, diagnosed in 2006**

Taking antidepressants won't improve your mood immediately, but you will gradually feel the full effect of your medication. As with most medications, antidepressants can have a variety of side effects but they are generally safe. There is no evidence that antidepressants are addictive. You can speak to the professional prescribing your medication if you have any concerns about the potential side effects. They should also be able to advise you on how to take antidepressants alongside your Parkinson's medication.

It is very important that you take antidepressants as prescribed, even if you feel better. Treatment should normally continue for six months after your symptoms improve, but may need to be long term, depending on the advice of your health professional.

Severe depression requires very specialised treatment through a specialist in psychiatry. Speak to your GP, specialist or Parkinson's nurse if you have any concerns.

## What about support groups?

Some people find it useful to talk to others who may know how they feel, because they have been in a similar situation.

People in support groups tend to share problems or experiences and can offer understanding and good advice based on what has helped them in the past.

Parkinson's UK has local groups across the UK that offer friendship and support. Visit [parkinsons.org.uk/localgroups](http://parkinsons.org.uk/localgroups) to find your nearest group.

Other organisations that run support groups that might be helpful include Depression Alliance, Carers UK and Princess Royal Trust for Carers.

Please see the more information and support section for contact details.

## Advice for family, friends and carers

The effects of depression can spread beyond the individual, so it is important for family, friends and carers to recognise that their own emotions can be negatively affected by the mood of someone with Parkinson's who is depressed.

Sometimes, a carer, or someone close to a person with Parkinson's, may recognise the symptoms of depression more clearly than the person themselves. If this is the case, they should talk about their concerns to the person with Parkinson's' GP, specialist or Parkinson's nurse.

It is also quite normal for a carer to feel many of the same feelings as the person with Parkinson's. These feelings may include difficulty accepting the diagnosis, fear about the future, anxiety, depression, fatigue and confusion about the changes in your role in your relationship.

For these reasons carers should also try to look after their physical and mental health as much as they can, which can help them maintain their caring role. This can be difficult, but it is important to remember that by taking care of your own health you will be better able to care for the person with Parkinson's, and not burn out.

Many carers find it helpful to join a support group where they can meet other people in a similar situation – Carers UK and the Princess Royal Trust for Carers all run groups for carers. See the more information and support sections for contact details.

**Find out more:** see our booklet *The carer's guide*.

## More information and support

### Parkinson's nurses

Parkinson's nurses provide expert advice and support to people with Parkinson's and those who care for them. They can also act as a liaison between other health and social care professionals to make sure your needs are met.

Parkinson's nurses may not be available in every area, but your GP or specialist can give you more details on local services.

### Information and support workers

Our information and support workers can also provide details and links to local services. They provide support for anyone affected by Parkinson's.

For details of the local information and support worker in your area, contact our helpline on **0808 800 0303** or email **hello@parkinsons.org.uk**. You can also find out more on our website at **parkinsons.org.uk/isw**

### Our helpline

Contact our free confidential helpline for general support and information. Call **0808 800 0303** (calls are free from UK landlines and most mobile networks) or email **hello@parkinsons.org.uk**

### Local groups

Support is available through Parkinson's UK local groups. Visit **parkinsons.org.uk/localgroups** or call our helpline for details of your nearest meeting.

### Online forum

Speak to others in a similar situation through our online discussion forum at **parkinsons.org.uk/forum**

### Depression Alliance

This is the national organisation supporting anyone with depression and their families. They have groups throughout the UK for self-help and mutual support. **0845 123 2320**  
**information@depressionalliance.org**  
**www.depressionalliance.org**

## Depression Alliance Scotland

**0845 123 2320**  
**info@dascot.org**  
**www.dascot.org**

## Samaritans

If you need someone to talk to, the Samaritans provides a place for people to explore their feelings in confidence and without prejudice. The charity offers services by phone, face to face, email and by letter.

**0845 790 9090**  
**jo@samaritans.org**  
**www.samaritans.org**

## Mind

Mind is a leading mental health organisation serving people in England and Wales. The charity provides support and advice on all kinds of mental health problems, including depression. It has a range of publications and local support groups.

**0300 123 3393**  
**info@mind.org.uk**  
**www.mind.org.uk**

## Scottish Association for Mental Health

For people living in Scotland, the Scottish Association for Mental Health can provide information and support.

**0141 530 1000**  
**info@samh.org.uk**  
**www.samh.org.uk**

## Carers UK

Carers UK provides information and support to people who are caring at home. The charity has support groups, branches and local offices throughout the UK.

**0808 808 7777**  
**advice@carersuk.org**  
**www.carersuk.org**

## The Princess Royal Trust for Carers

This charity provides support, information and centres for carers throughout the UK and most centres run carers' groups.

London Office **0844 800 4361**  
Glasgow Office **0141 221 5066**  
Wales Office **02920 221 788**  
**info@carers.org**  
**www.carers.org**

## British Psychological Society

Contact the society or use its website to find a clinical or counselling psychologist in your area.

**0116 254 9568**  
**enquiries@bps.org.uk**  
**www.bps.org.uk**

## British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

You can find contact details for local counsellors and psychotherapists on this website.

**01455 883300**  
**Text 01455 550243**  
**www.bacp.co.uk**

## Aware Defeat Depression

This charity provides support to people living with depression in Northern Ireland.

**08451 20 29 61**  
**help@aware-ni.org**  
**www.aware-ni.org**

## Resources on depression

There are some general books on depression, some of which you can find on the Depression Alliance website (**www.depressionalliance.org**) with comments from members on their usefulness. For further information about self-help for depression, see **www.nhs.uk**

## Thank you

Thank you very much to everyone who contributed to or reviewed this information sheet:

**Richard Brown, Professor of Neuropsychology and Clinical Neuroscience, King's College London**

**Dr John Hindle, Consultant Physician Care of the Elderly, Clinical Director of Medicine, North West Wales NHS Trust**

Thanks also to our information review group and other people affected by Parkinson's who provided feedback.



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## Depression and Parkinson's

If you have comments or suggestions about this information sheet, we'd love to hear from you. This will help us ensure that we are providing as good a service as possible.

We'd be very grateful if you could complete this form and return it to **Information Resources, Parkinson's UK, 215 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 1EJ**. Or you can email us at [publications@parkinsons.org.uk](mailto:publications@parkinsons.org.uk). Thanks!

### Please tick...

- I have Parkinson's. When were you diagnosed? .....
- I'm family/a friend/a carer of someone with Parkinson's
- I'm a professional working with people with Parkinson's

Where did you get this information sheet from?

- GP, specialist or Parkinson's nurse
- Parkinson's UK local group or event
- Our website
- Information and support worker
- Ordered from us directly
- Other .....

We're the Parkinson's support and research charity. Help us find a cure and improve life for everyone affected by Parkinson's.

### Can you help?

At Parkinson's UK, we are totally dependent on donations from individuals and organisations to fund the work that we do. There are many ways that you can help us to support people with Parkinson's. If you would like to get involved, please contact our Supporter Services team on **020 7932 1303** or visit our website at **parkinsons.org.uk/support**. Thank you.

### Parkinson's UK

Free\* confidential helpline **0808 800 0303**

Monday to Friday 9am–8pm, Saturday 10am–2pm. Interpreting available.

Text Relay **18001 0808 800 0303**

(for textphone users only)

**hello@parkinsons.org.uk**

**parkinsons.org.uk**

\*calls are free from UK landlines and most mobile networks.

### How to order our resources

**01473 212115**

**resources@parkinsons.org.uk**

**parkinsons.org.uk/publications**

We make every effort to make sure that our services provide up-to-date, unbiased and accurate facts. We hope that these will add to any professional advice you receive and will help you to make any decisions you may face. Please do continue to talk to your health and social care team if you are worried about any aspect of living with Parkinson's.

References for this information sheet can be found in the Microsoft Word version at **parkinsons.org.uk/publications**

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How useful have you found the information sheet? (1 is not useful, 4 is very useful) 1 2 3 4

Have you found the publication easy to read/use?  Yes  No

What aspects did you find most helpful? .....

Were you looking for any information that wasn't covered? .....

Do you have any other comments? .....

If you would like to become a member of Parkinson's UK, or are interested in joining our information review group, please complete the details below and we'll be in touch.

Membership  Information review group (who give us feedback on new and updated resources)

Name .....

Address .....

Telephone ..... Email .....