

# Mild to moderate depression and anxiety

## What is depression?

The word depressed is a common everyday word. People might say “I’m depressed” when they are feeling down or when something upsetting or stressful happens. These ups and downs of life are common and normal. Most people recover quite quickly, and these feelings decrease. However, with depression, you can have a low mood and/or other symptoms (listed below) that don’t go away.

Some of the key sign and symptoms are:

- Constantly **feeling down or hopeless**. This is described in varying ways by people, you may feel empty, or have no feelings, or you may feel pain.
- Having **little interest or pleasure** in doing things you used to enjoy. This is a reduced ability for enjoyment.

Other possible signs and symptoms are:

- An **irritable mood**. This can be the main mood change, particularly in younger people, and in men (especially Māori and Pacific men).
- **Change in sleeping patterns**. Most commonly, people have reduced or disturbed sleep, although some people sleep too much.
- **Change in appetite**. Most often people do not feel like eating and as a result will have lost weight. Some people have increased appetite
- **Decreased energy, tiredness and fatigue**. These feelings may be so severe that even the smallest task seems too difficult to finish.
- **Feeling bad about yourself** or the things you have done
- A **loss of interest in activities** you once enjoyed or not wanting to socialise
- **Thoughts of hopelessness and death**. You may feel there is no hope in life or have thoughts of death or suicide.
- **Difficulty thinking clearly**. You may have difficulty making decisions or concentrating on work or study

Depression may be classified as mild, moderate or severe. The exact classification is based on many factors. These include the types of symptoms you experience, their severity, and how often they occur. Moderate and mild depression share similar symptoms. Additionally, moderate depression may cause:

- Problems with self-esteem
- Reduced productivity
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Increased sensitivities
- Excessive worrying

It is common for people who have depression to also feel anxious, about 1 in 5 people with depression or anxiety will experience both at the same time

## What is anxiety?

Most people feel anxious (fearful and tense) from time to time. However, anxiety can become a problem if it interferes with your day-to-day activities. For example people with anxiety may experience:

- Excessive worry or fear, with symptoms such as muscle tension, the sensation of having a ‘thumping heart’ (palpitations), dry mouth.
- Panic attacks. Sudden episodes of extreme anxiety and panic
- Phobias. Specific fears regarding situations, objects or creatures.
- Excessive concern about physical health.

Some people also have physical symptoms, such as:

- A fast heart rate
- A feeling of sickness (nausea)
- Shaking
- Sweating
- Chest pain
- Headaches
- Fast breathing

## Who is affected by mild to moderate depression and anxiety?

Depression and anxiety can affect anyone, at any age, from childhood through to old age, although it is more common in the 25 to 45-year-old age group.

Māori adults are 1.5 times as likely as non-Māori adults to report having anxiety or depression

Pacific young people (those aged 15-24 years) are about 2 times as likely to have depression, anxiety issues, or to make suicide attempts as the rest of the population

Sometimes depression and anxiety appears out of the blue, while at other times something seems to trigger it. The exact cause is unknown, but many factors may play a role. For example, you are more likely to experience depression or anxiety if you:

- Have someone in your family who has mental health issues
- Experienced trauma or abuse at an early age
- Have certain chronic physical health conditions, such as diabetes, cancer, heart disease or Parkinson’s disease
- Are going through major life changes such as a relationship break-up or lost your job
- Are LGBTIA+
- Are or have just been pregnant
- Are an older adult
- Use alcohol or recreational drugs

## When to seek help

If you have some, but not necessarily all, the symptoms mentioned above, it's a good idea to see your doctor. There are also online self-tests you can do e.g. <https://depression.org.nz/is-it-depression-anxiety/self-test/>

## Treatment options for mild to moderate depression or anxiety

The main aim of treatment is to help you to reduce symptoms so that your anxiety or depression are no longer affecting your day-to-day life.

### 1. Self-help treatments

Certain lifestyle changes can go a long way in boosting serotonin levels (chemicals in the brain be involved in causing anxiety or depression), which can help fight depressive or anxiety symptoms. Helpful lifestyle changes include:

- exercising daily
- adhering to a sleep schedule
- eating a balanced diet rich in fruits and vegetables
- practicing yoga or meditation
- doing activities that reduce stress, such listening to music
- seeking social support from whānau/family and friends
- maintaining cultural, religious or spiritual connections

### 2. Talking therapies

Mild depression and anxiety are usually treated with psychological treatments (talking therapies), and medication is not normally needed. These treatments are centred on building mental strength and resilience and are the first choice for treatment.

Moderate depression is treated with psychological treatments and sometimes antidepressant medication.

Talking therapies involve talking to someone who is trained to help you deal with your negative feelings or distress. Typically, these treatments last in the range of 8-12 weekly sessions of 1 hour per session. The most common talking therapies are CBT and counselling.

#### Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

CBT is considered the most effective and the first-choice in treatment for anxiety and depression. It can help you manage your problems by changing the way you feel, think and act. CBT aims to find practical ways to help you deal with problems in a more positive way by breaking them down into smaller parts.

You can attend CBT sessions individually or in a group, or by using self-help resources or a computer programme. Some CBT programmes are:

- [depression.org.nz](https://depression.org.nz) is a free New Zealand-based website that uses CBT-based online self-help programmes for depression and anxiety, with particular focus on Māori wellbeing.
- [auntydee.co.nz](https://auntydee.co.nz) a CBT-based approach for wellbeing,

anxiety and stress that has been adapted for Pasifika cultural groups by LeVa. This is a free self-directed web based tool.

- [beatingtheblues.co.nz](https://beatingtheblues.co.nz) is the most widely used evidence-based online CBT programme for relieving depression and anxiety, the results are effective and quick. Free access to the online programme is managed by your GP – you will complete eight weekly sessions, each session takes about 50 minutes (at a time that suits you).

The programme is very user friendly, and you don't need to have good computer knowledge to participate.

If you would like to access Beating the Blues®:

1. View the short video about Beating the Blues® at [beatingtheblues.co.nz](https://beatingtheblues.co.nz)
2. Talk to your GP if you think Beating the Blues® could be helpful for you.
3. Get a free 'Blue Prescription' from your GP with information to get you started. You should also book a follow-up appointment with your GP (usually after session 3 of the programme) to check how things are going for you.

### 3. Medicines

#### Antidepressant medicines

Antidepressant drugs can be effective for treating moderate to severe depression or anxiety. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are the group of antidepressants commonly prescribed or anxiety disorders.

#### Benzodiazepines

A short course of benzodiazepines may be an option for anxiety which is severe. This treatment would be decided by your doctor and is not normally used for mild/moderate anxiety.

## More information

You should see your doctor if your depression or anxiety are beyond your control.

- Need to talk? 1737 is free to call or text from any landline or mobile phone, 24 hours a day 7 days a week.
- Lifeline Aotearoa 24/7 counselling and support 0800 534 354

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