

Depression: Something you cannot do alone

Today, feeling 'down' or 'having the blues' is taken much more seriously than it was years ago.

Having a mental illness, in particular, depression, has become more of a big deal these days, with countless people seeking treatment. However, many still do not. Opinions vary about what depression is. Some think it's just feeling down for a few days, others have this idea that you need to be suicidal in order to be classified with a mental illness.

Official guides say that to be classified as a sufferer of depression you have to be feeling a number of things for a period of a few weeks. But in truth, it's much more than that.

I was diagnosed with clinical depression last year, when I was in Year 9. I've never really spoken about my experiences openly before and even find it difficult to communicate with my parents sometimes. But let me tell you this: Depression affects more than just your mood. I may not know too many facts and statistics about depression, but I do know that I would not have come as far as I have come now without the help of my family, friends and the various doctors I have consulted.

I believe that the main reason for my depression is my facial paralysis (Moebius Syndrome) which has affected me since birth. I have had several operations to correct it, but it is still quite noticeable and I am often finding myself worrying about how I look, who is looking at me and if anyone is going to have a go at me.

While I was in primary school this didn't worry me as much, but since I entered high school, learnt more about life and became more mature, my worries have increased – and looking different hasn't helped.

Last year, my life went crashing down. I found myself feeling worse and worse, even resorting to hurting and mutilating myself on a few occasions. My parents took me to see several psychiatrists who diagnosed me with depression; I started going to see a child psychiatrist who put me on medication as part of my treatment.

I believe going to see a doctor is essential: you can't just tell your friends or family and expect they'll give you all the answers, because they won't and can't. There is much misunderstanding when it comes to depression. You actually need to have that professional help and support from outside your normal boundaries.

Let me tell you that taking medication on a daily basis is no mean feat. Anyone taking tablets regularly can tell you that. There are days when you forget to take a tablet and days when you remember. There are days when you can't be bothered to have your dose and yes, there are days when you wish you could swallow the whole lot and be done with it. If your doctor prescribes medication for you, it is important that you follow their instructions because often the medication is designed to break you out of your negative moods.

I recall that my friends were shocked when I told them I had depression.

When I began to feel really down, I started telling them all that I felt, as you do. I was pouring out all my sorrow and bad thoughts onto them, which made them very worried, eventually deciding them to go and see the school counsellor about me.

The counsellor told me not to talk with my friends about my problems as it is too big an issue for them to handle. My friends have nevertheless been extremely supportive, always ready to listen and trying their best to cheer me up and make me smile, but now, a year later, I tend not to share so much.

To find out that your child has depression would be a hard reality, and I think it was for my parents, and kind of still is. The thing that probably scared them the most was my mood and my attempts to hurt myself, which I began to discuss openly with them after seeing the school counsellor. To this day, my parents have been the root holding me down, the grip keeping me in place. Without them I have no idea what I would be experiencing now but I'm sure I would be far worse off if it wasn't for their ongoing support, guidance and open ears.

Lots of teenagers find it hard to talk to their parents, but I think that if you have a genuine concern or problem as big as a suspected mental illness, you have to let them know because, believe it or not, they can actually help you, and will (most of the time) tend to understand what you're going through.

My psychiatrist always tells me that with my depression it is always important that I have an outlet to keep me occupied and take my mind off negative thoughts. My parents encourage me to throw myself into everything I can socially but because of my facial condition I am anxious about any new social encounters, so I tend to prefer individual rather than group activities.

Writing has been a great outlet for me. Over the last year or so I have written poems, stories, and just jotted my thoughts down, which seems to help; and listening to the right music has calmed me down when I have felt particularly angry or scared.

Religion and spirituality is a big part of my life, and I regularly ask God for guidance.

Depression has affected my life in many ways. My mood fluctuates so rapidly that one minute I can be happy and the next I can be in tears over nothing. I see myself as a particularly sensitive person, and find that receiving a hug or having someone tell me that they love me alleviates a lot of my inner pain.

People have some crazy ideas about depression because it is misunderstood. Today, it is commonly associated with suicide, drugs, doctors and 'having the blues'. Depression shouldn't be taken lightly. It's treatable, yes, but it is still a mental illness, meaning that it affects the inner mechanisms of the way we function. Just the question 'How are you?' reminds me that I have depression, so now, when I am asked how I am, I have to think about how I really feel instead of saying 'Good' and taking the easy way out. So, understandably, I have come to hate that question, which has become a form of greeting rather than a genuine enquiry about one's wellbeing.

I have learnt a lot through being diagnosed with depression. I find that I have more empathy for my family and friends when they are feeling down and have learnt how to help them through receiving help myself. Even though I still have depression and I am not completely out of the woods, I am a lot better

than I was last year and would definitely not have improved without the help of my parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, teachers, counsellor and psychiatrist.

Depression can be defeated.

It doesn't have to sit quietly, making you feel worse and worse. The countless people who have overcome a mental illness such as depression are living proof of that, because they have accepted their circumstances and acknowledged the fact that they need help in the first place.

I would have to say the most important thing I have learnt through my suffering with depression is this: There are some things you cannot do alone, and getting over depression is one of them.

I will get over mine.