

A way out of great despair

The Defeat Depression Campaign promises happier lives

Depression is a vast problem. The Mental Health Foundation estimates that 2.3 million people suffer from a major depressive illness; to put it another way, it affects between 3 and 5 per cent of the population annually. The rates of lesser degrees of depression and unhappiness are far higher.

A large American study found that depression was associated with physical and social disability that was either comparable to, or in excess of, those found in most medical conditions. Depressed patients spend more days in bed than those with either arthritis or diabetes. Of the estimated £3,400 million that depression costs Britain annually, 70 per cent is in lost production.

In this country there are many studies to show that, even with the best of intentions, general practitioners fail to diagnose correctly about half their depressed patients. This is because most sufferers present not with obvious signs of low mood, such as feeling suicidal or excessive guilt, but with what are called somatic symptoms, such as insomnia, pain, headache and exhaustion. That is partly because many people believe that doctors prefer to deal with physical rather than psychological symptoms.

In most, but not all, cases there is evidence of other

symptoms of depression, such as low mood, hopelessness and poor concentration. An American study followed up people in the community who complained simply of poor sleep, exhaustion and other symptoms. One year later, those with poor sleep were 12

times more likely to be depressed than those without the complaint — those with severe fatigue were seven times more likely. Thus poor sleep or tiredness alone can be the first stage of depression. Some depressed patients never show the more obvious signs of mood disorder, and continue to present with unexplained symptoms, which only improve when given anti-depressants. This has been labelled "masked depression".

What can be done? The first step is for both sufferers and doctors to recognise the possibility of depression. The diagnosis is usually easy, provided the doctor remembers to ask the relevant questions. The Royal College of Psychiatrists and the Royal College of

General Practitioners, together with the Department of Health, who are the leaders in the Defeat Depression Campaign, are working to help doctors improve their skills in detecting depression.

Once diagnosed, if the patient does not present with

‘For many people, it is a sign of lack of will power’

classical symptoms, the doctor may start by making the link between physical symptoms and mood. Many patients will be prescribed anti-depressants. There are now thousands of studies showing they are effective. Although other treatments can equal this success

rate, no single treatment has ever been shown to be superior. Like all drugs, anti-depressants have side effects, but the benefits more than outweigh them.

However, not everyone responds to drugs. Some sufferers simply don't like the idea of taking any drug at all. Fortunately psychological therapies, especially the newer interventions such as cognitive or brief psychotherapies, are also effective. Sadly, these

treatments require skilled therapists, who are in short supply. Many doctors combine anti-depressants with psychological treatments, thus getting the best of both.

Of course, sometimes depression is not readily treated, and some patients enter upon a lifetime of misery and require long-term specialist care. Fortunately these are the minority. Why then do we need a campaign at all?

The answer is that the public remains ignorant about most basic facts of depression and its treatment. Most people continue to confuse anti-depressants with tranquillisers, and believe, wrongly, that the former as well as the latter can be addictive.

Most damaging of all is the stigma that surrounds depression. For many people it remains a moral judgment, an indication of failure — of low moral fibre and lack of will power. Part of the nature of depression is that many sufferers believe the same, but that is the consequence, and not the cause of illness. The objective of the Defeat Depression Campaign is to reduce this unfair stigma that prevents so many people from receiving what help is already available.

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