

The Great Depression

Do you feel you just can't put on a happy face?

By Rebecca Wicks

College students have long been the focus of negative attention – though not so much here, as in other countries of the world. Binge-drinking, crimes on the campus and in their hosting cities, debts and petty stunts that spin out of control – have all helped to paint a picture of a life gone wild, outside of any form of parental control. Despite all of this, many students are living a happy life of new beginnings.

Recently though, a *new* concern has taken over. Increasing cases of mental illness on college campuses have set the alarm bells ringing. Maybe everything's not quite as it seems behind the scenes.

Have you noticed a change in yourself since starting college that isn't always for the better? Have you noticed anything different about your friends? Depression could be lurking ominously round the corner, unless you're quick to take action.

Of course, *recognizing* a problem before it gets too big to handle, is half the battle. We've all felt down at times, and had to face situations that we feel we're not prepared for. But for many people, starting college, brand new surroundings, feelings of homesickness, new pressures of work and social stigmas, mean that the depression is intensified. Suddenly, a whole new set of problems can dwarf any others that came before and for some people, depression can spiral out of control.

"I kept asking myself, 'How could I be depressed?' I'd had a normal family life, had been getting good grades, and hadn't experienced any big trauma – where did my depression come from?" – John (www.campusblues.com)

Recognizing the symptoms

If you're not sure what to look out for when identifying depression, it's an immeasurably powerful feeling of hopelessness, sadness and despair that can sneak up on you without warning. It's more than being in a bad mood. It's an all-time low that you can't control and stops your concentration inexplicably.

According to the World Health Organization, depression affects roughly 121 million people worldwide at some stage in their lives, but it's nothing to be ashamed of. Perhaps the most important thing to understand is that quite often, depression is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain, or a



genetic predisposition to depression that might have gone unnoticed in the family. Suffering depression is by no means a sign of weakness, but it can manifest itself in many forms.

Types of depression

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) on its website, www.nimn.nih.gov, defines three common forms of depression:

• **Major Depression:** anxiety, sadness, emptiness, decreased energy, sleep disturbances and thoughts of suicide are amongst the symptoms.

• **Dysthymia:** less intense, but can involve long-term, chronic symptoms affecting the sufferer's happiness.

• **Bipolar illness:** can also be called manic depression. Dramatic mood swings happen in unpredictable cycles between intense happiness and depression, usually over the course of several weeks. "Manic" phases can include wild notions and reckless behavior:

"During a manic episode, I stayed awake for five days straight, but had a lot of energy. I spent my tuition money on a major shopping spree and long-distance phone calls. At the time, I felt so great that I couldn't see that there would be serious consequences to what I was doing." – Teresa.

(www.campusblues.com)

For the most part, specific symptoms are varied. Appetite changes and excessive weight loss or gain are give-aways. A loss of

interest in sports or other physical or social activities is another sneakier one. Physical aches and pains, sickness, a resistance to get out of bed in the morning and strong feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem, are screaming signs that you or someone close to you might be in trouble.

There are lots of factors when it comes to college students and depression. Money worries for example, can lead to sleepless nights, which in turn lead to a lack of concentration in class and failing grades.

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Homesickness is a big one – most students have never lived away from home before college. Other factors include worries about the future – “What comes next?” or “How am I going to make it?” – relationship troubles, dorm and friendship dramas.

Beating depression

What do you do if you feel it might be happening to you? From mild feelings of anxi-

ety, right through to thoughts of suicide, it's important to talk to somebody. Seek help and a listening ear. Most colleges have a counseling system that's always open to students, with or without an appointment. Staff are experienced, know the kind of problems students tend to face, and even through those niggling feelings of doubt by you – they usually can.

In fact, most mental and behavioral disorders can be treated successfully with talk therapy or medication. All the same, nearly

even dangerous or evil. Hospitals and treatment centers are often portrayed as dark, frightening places, where horror, torture and terror take centerstage on a bed with gags and straps.

Well, don't believe the hype. At least 80 percent of those receiving treatment will get better. And, hardly any are locked in white rooms, or forced to struggle with straitjackets.

The truth is that we can all be moody sometimes, and college life is the tough-

two-thirds of those with a known mental disorder never seek help from a professional, and less than a quarter actually seek professional treatment. When it comes to the crunch, the stigma around “mental illness” is known to be the biggest barrier between people in need of psychiatric attention actually getting the care they need. We've all seen the movies where the mentally ill are shown to be unpredictable and scary,

est phase most of us will ever have to go through in life. But there's a fine line between stress and serious depression. The best you can do is to eat healthily, get enough sleep, stay away from damaging toxins like alcohol and keep on top of the exercising regularly and your studies. Keep your body moving, your mind alert and most of all – be sure to keep a watchful eye out for your closest friends. ☺

