

Depression strikes university students nationwide

By KAREN RAWLINES

With midterms through and final exams just around the corner, students across the country are not foreign to depression.

In fact, throughout the school year up to 78 percent of all university students suffer some symptoms of depression. At any given time, from 16 to 25 percent of the student population is experiencing such symptoms.

Students stricken with depression are subject to a wide range of symptoms.

The milder side of the disorder can include mere inconvenience, an experience of irritability or trouble paying attention in class, and withdrawal contact from family and friends.

More severe depression can become quite debilitating and even life threatening. In very severe cases, thoughts of suicide, and in the worse cases, suicide attempts, are possible.

Michael Ungar, a guidance counsellor at UPEI explains that university students can be prime targets for these experiences.

"Students usually arrive at university with high-achieving goals. They carry excess baggage and a message telling them that they need to succeed," he says.

Any major change can act as a clue that someone may be depressed, Ungar explained. This may include disrupted sleeping or eating patterns, excessive drinking or initiating any other such habit, or other ongoing, cyclic changes.

Often it is difficult for an individual to actually believe that she or he is depressed.

"If marks and relationships are still meeting expectations, then people tend to persist in the same patterns," Ungar says. "But one way or

another, stressors will show up, and your physical health will break down."

Donald Stewart is a clinical psychologist and associate professor at Counselling Services and director of training program at the University of Manitoba. According to him, depression is one of the most common complaints he hears.

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"At this time in the year, you're probably going to be finding a degree of depression in every student as we get close to crunch time with examinations," he says.

The most obvious symptoms include depressed mood and a prolonged sense of unhappiness.

Stewart adds that a condition called anhedonia—a lack of interest in or loss of pleasure in previously enjoyable activities—also accompanies depression. "Things that used to bring pleasure...don't make the person happy anymore," he says.

Stewart says that it is not uncommon for students to become depressed to the point where they are unable to attend class or to write exams. Still other students become depressed to the point that they might have suicidal thoughts or even act on those thoughts.

"It becomes a question of how many straws it takes to break the camels back," he says. "For one student, it may be failing an exam. Other students may be quite resilient and it takes a number of failures to not feel well. It's an accumulation of things."

Increasing school demands may make bouts of de-

pression seem insurmountable for many students.

"Something I've noticed over the last ten years is that we're seeing more students who are depressed now—more students with serious depression," Stewart says. "As resources become strained and people have more demands placed on them, it's becoming harder and harder to cope."

Financial difficulties also factor into the likelihood for student depression.

"The costs are also increasing with student loans being inadequate and summer jobs being harder to get so we're seeing the number of students with part time or even full time jobs taking full course loads."

Ungar notes that there can be a significant gender difference in coping with these stressors.

Women, for instance, tend to create a cycle involving body image and eating disorders. Men, on the other hand, tend to exhibit other forms of self-destructive behaviour and risk-taking, such as drinking and driving.

While most cases of student depression are reactive to the situation, some may be biologically-based. Individuals who have a tendency to depression may be exhibiting a chronic form of the disorder, which may require a pharmaceutical solution.

The time line for recovery is determined on an individual basis. Some form of treatment, which can include counselling, therapy, or medication, can help most students make a good recovery. Ungar suggests that even small adjustments in regular routines can make the difference.

"Invest in yourself," Ungar says. "People have their own solutions within themselves."

Ungar continues to say that there are up sides to stress. "It's functional. Your body

reacts. It's natural and self-regulating to help avoid burn-out. People have to see its usefulness and accept it."

"This is sort of a trite saying, but I think it's true that we often learn more from our failures than we do from our successes," Stewart adds.

Stewart and Ungar both note that if students are experiencing symptoms, then it's crucial that they seek help.

"Depression is a very treatable condition," Stewart says. "It is something that is well understood and respon-

sive to intervention. It's not the kind of thing that will go away on its own. If it's a *bona fide* depression, it's likely to get worse, not better."

Michael Ungar pointed out that an appointment with Student Services may be the ideal way to begin approaching someone with your distress, as the environment is non-stigmatizing. They handle everything from academic issues to personal issues.

Various problems typically contribute to such depressive feelings. Here are some of the most common:

1. Stresses from the increased difficulty of college work and pressure to make a career choice often leave students feeling that they are missing out on fun or that all their hard work is meaningless.
2. Isolation and loneliness are common when a student leaves his or her support group behind. Before, family, a circle of high school friends, and often an intimate boyfriend or girlfriend could be counted on for support or encouragement.
3. Problems with studying and grades frequently trigger depression. Many students enter college with high aspirations and little former experience with failure. At the same time, many lack basic skills necessary for academic success.
4. Another common cause of college depression is the breakup of an intimate relationship, either with a former boyfriend or girlfriend, or with a newly formed college romance.
5. Students who find it difficult to live up to their idealized images of themselves are also prone to depression.

(Source: Beck and Young, *College Blues*. *Psychology Today*.)

Aaron Beck, an authority on depression, suggests you should assume that more than a minor fluctuation in mood is involved when five conditions exist:

1. You have a consistently negative opinion of yourself.
2. You engage in frequent self-criticism and self-blame.
3. You place negative interpretations on events that usually wouldn't bother you.
4. The future looks bleak and negative.
5. You feel that your responsibilities are overwhelming.

(Source: Beck and Greenberg, *Coping with Depression*. Institute for Rational Living)