

# When the mood is all wrong

**D**epression has come out of the closet. Now everyone in Britain seems to be talking about it and writing about it as if it were as cool as a date with P. Diddy. Yo! Baby, I'm depressed. How 'bout you? If you're not depressed, why not?

Depressives and former depressives write about their experience as if it were some newfound toy. Just as the British lost their Empire, they have lost the stiff upper lip, the pull-yourself-together-and-just-get-on-with-it attitude. One longs for the old, non-confessional days.

So, as I say, depression has come out of the closet, sort of. Yet, overwhelmingly, the reality is that a stigma remains attached to real depression.

People fear mental illness the way they fear going blind, getting cancer or being paralysed, and the truth is that our attitudes do not seem to be improving despite the fact that huge swaths of the population report in with depression. Depression is the new lactose intolerance.

It seems that about 15% of the British population turn to their doctors for help; and that would explain why 19-million prescriptions for antidepressants were written last year, costing the National Health Ser-

vice a whopping £400 million. The World Health Organisation has said there is some evidence that by 2020 depression could be the biggest cause of death and disability in the world.

Clearly, depression is not something that is just in our heads.

Much has also been written about the detrimental effects of Prozac and Zoloft, with unhappy pill-takers catapulting themselves out of tall buildings.

These "happy pills", say the critics, have turned Britons into a nation of giggling, numbed zombies. They condemn it as Botox for the brain. Prozac takes over where lobotomies left off. Upset by not having your favourite starter on the menu? Don't feel down. Down some pills.

That's the conventional wisdom, which misses an important point.

While certainly they are not always the answer, pills can make a huge difference for those with a chemical imbalance pills, as they stabilise, restore, balance and carry out complex repairs - producing serotonin, which the brain of a depressed-anxiety sufferer can never make enough of.

The best explanation of that I've ever heard is that antidepressants act like fine-

tuners, re-establishing energy, drive, interest, the ability to function and perspective, all of which are so often lost in the depressive state.

Clinical depression has a physical dimension to it; circumstantial depression is situational. Anti-depressants change the chemistry, not the circumstances.

When you fall into that black pit of despair from which there seems no way out, when you want to die, it's simply not about being mopy, whiny, whiny or sad.

Pills, especially this generation which provoke fewer side effects, do not produce instant happiness, and to suggest otherwise is to peddle a cliché, to be ill informed, misguided and possibly downright dangerous.

When bad things happen, pills may not provide the answers but they can help some people get through rough patches caused by traumatic events such as divorce or bereavement.

There is an issue about harassed and overworked GPs, which is where most patients make their first port of call, handing out too many prescriptions, which may



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well be ineffective.

And that has to be taken into account as people react differently to different situations: some are more resilient than others. Britain remains one of the last bastions of psychotherapy, a treatment that in the past was often considered not much more cost-effective than drugs, especially when consultations, like Woody Allen's could go on for decades.

But it seems fair to suppose that talking therapies will always make a substantial contribution to healthcare by dealing with the underlying causes.

Too many antidepressants may be prescribed for unfortunate experiences.

Drugs may not provide all the answers, but they certainly provide some.

Confusion exists around these issues but we need, in the public arena, a deeper understanding of what depression is about.