

Depression is a silent epidemic against which there is no immunisation. There is no cure. It can affect anyone, at any time. However, it is an illness that

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IT is normal for almost all of us, at some point in our life, to feel sad. People often use the word 'depression' to describe this transitory feeling of gloom that may take over from time to time. There is, however, a difference between these feelings of sadness and a serious, if not life threatening, clinical/psychiatric condition of depression. Depression affects us not just at the level of our emotions, but impacts our thoughts and actions as well. It affects our ability to eat, sleep, work, think and relate. It shatters our self-esteem and mundane everyday tasks appear gargantuan. Feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, worthlessness and guilt take over. Patients with depression are no longer able to think, concentrate or make decisions for themselves. Recurrent thoughts of death and suicide are not uncommon.

#### Facts about depression

Depression is not a sign of personal weakness or the patient's fault. Just like diabetes and hypothyroidism, it cannot be willed away. It is an illness, which requires medical treatment just as any other.

Depression is common. In fact, it is so common that it has often been referred to as the "common cold of mental illness".

A major depressive disorder is not a benign disorder. It tends to be chronic, and patients tend to relapse.

Depression does not discriminate between the rich and the poor, or the famous and the unknown. Winston Churchill, Princess Diana, and even comedians like Jim Carrey and Drew Carey, have battled with depression at some point in their lives.

#### Causes

There is no definite cause for depression. Instead, it is attributed to the interaction of various biological, genetic, environmental and psychological factors.

**Biological and genetic:** Our brain utilises many chemical messengers called neurotransmitters to carry signals from one part of the brain to the other. An imbalance - either too much or too little - of some of these chemicals can lead to depression. The neurotransmitters implicated in depression are norepinephrine, serotonin and dopamine.

Many research studies have documented the heritability of depression. In fact, among identical twins, if one twin has depression, the likelihood of the other having a mood disorder is about 70-90 per cent.

**Life events and environmental stress:** It has long been observed that stressful life events often precede the onset of depression. The disorder has been related to the experience of events beyond our control. The loss of a parent before the age of 11, the loss of a spouse and unemployment have been found to be the most significant risk factors when we talk of mood disorders. Alcohol and substance abuse have also been associated with depression.

**Psychological/Personality factors:** Early life relationships, family interaction patterns, communication styles, coping and problem-solving abilities and thought processes have all been linked to depression. People who suffer from depression often have a distorted perception of their experiences. The distortion in their thought process causes

them to have a negative view of themselves. At the same time, they perceive others and the environment around them to be hostile and demanding. They tend to become pessimistic and view their future to be hopeless.

#### Treatment

While an untreated depressive episode lasts about six to 13 months, most treated episodes last about three months. The treatment of depression may involve a combination of medicines as well as individual and group psychotherapies. While patients and clinicians may choose one over the other, the ideal approach usually involves a judicious mix of both.

**Pharmacological therapy:** Since it is now widely recognised that depression is caused due to the imbalance of certain neurotransmitters in our brain, specific medications have been developed to correct this imbalance. Over the years, the efficacy of these anti-depressants has increased, and the side-effects are now negligible. Although most people are still apprehensive about taking these medi-

cines, what must be understood is that in cases of moderate to severe depression, particularly, treatment without medicines is next to impossible.

**Psychological therapy:** Along with medicines, many forms of psychotherapy have also been found to be effective in the management of depression. These therapies focus on correcting maladaptive behaviours and thought processes, working with family interaction patterns and improving coping and problem-solving abilities. Once the severely debilitating symptoms of depression have been eased, therapy helps patients understand their experiences better, regain the sense of control over their lives, and subsequently reduce the likelihood of a relapse.

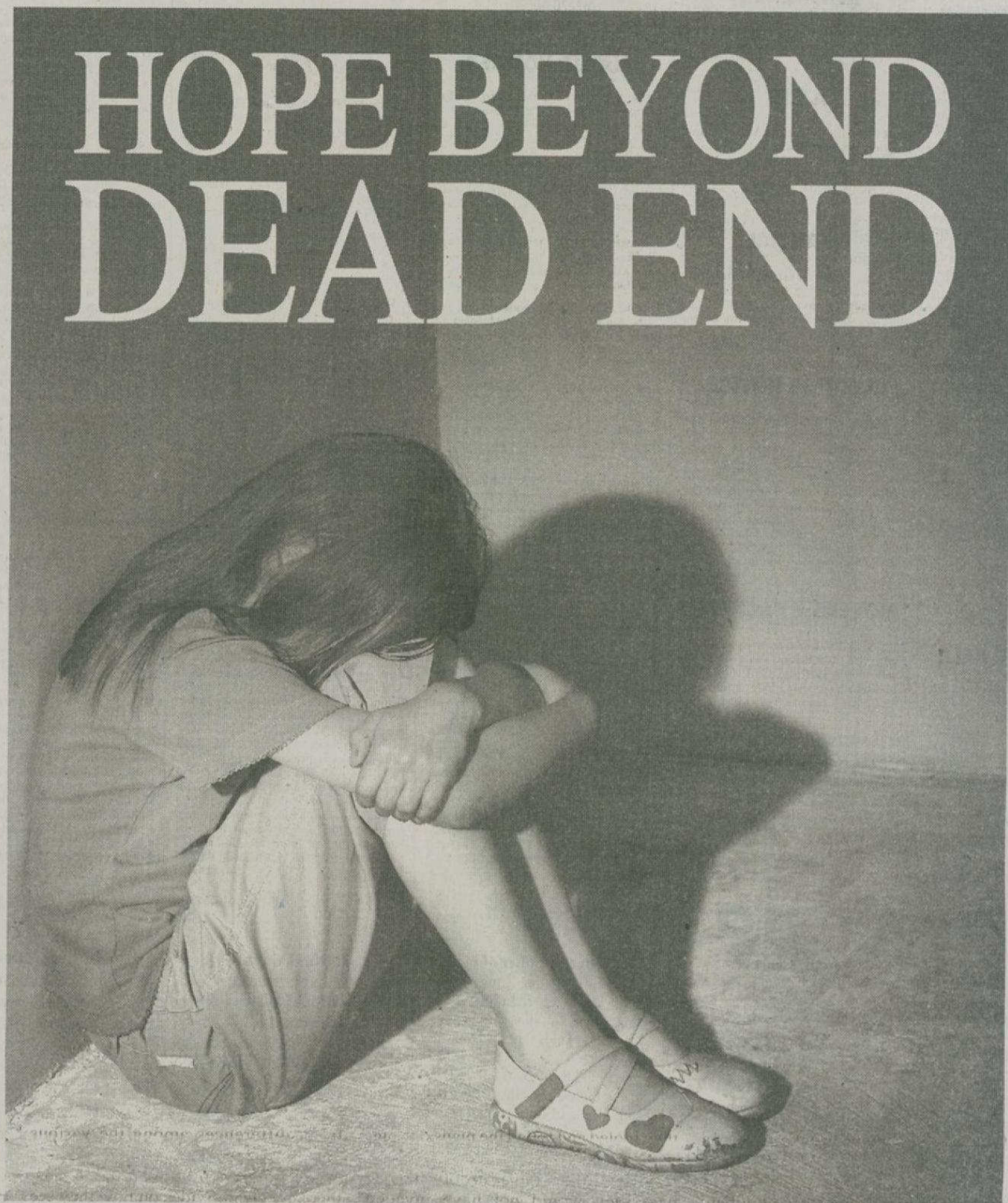
#### What you can do

Social support is a key factor in the recovery of a depressed patient. It is, therefore, important to 'be there' for the patient, and to listen to and understand their thoughts and feelings. We should never negate the experience or the suffering of the other person. Living with a per-

son suffering from any mental illness can often be a challenging and frustrating experience. Understand that the patient is not behaving in a certain way out of choice, and just like any medical illness, they are unable to "snap out of it".

Besides feeling alone and misunderstood, we must realise that patients due to the very nature of the disease, experience a lack of energy, motivation and a sense of helplessness. As a caregiver/well-wisher, the best one can do is to identify a mental health facility and encourage the patient to visit the clinician. We now have data to suggest that 80 per cent depressed patients, who receive medical treatment, benefit from it. Depression is a silent epidemic against which there is no immunisation. It can affect anyone, at any time. However, it is an illness that can be treated, and no one deserves to be deprived of a happier and healthier life because of it.

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