

Fighting depression

Accountants are among professionals likely to suffer from “Black Dog” blues, writes *Alex Sutcliffe*

It's a global depression in more ways than one – as stock markets plummet, jobs are lost and debts loom, it's hard not to slide into what Winston Churchill called his “Black Dog” – and those working in the financial sector would seem to be particularly susceptible.

A 2007 report published by the Australian consultancy firm Beaton found that professionals such as lawyers and accountants were at higher risk for depression than the general population – and that was even before the economic downturn.

“Accountants face highly stressful work demands and their long hours alone can cause burnout or depression,” says Alice Yu, a counsellor at ReSource, a counselling centre.

“Everyone I encounter is stressed and depressed about the meltdown,” says Dr. Melanie Byron of Hong Kong-based clinic Mind Matters. “It's been assumed that people in the finance industry would turn to therapists for support and coping strategies, but I've not seen any uptick in my practice regarding this issue. This is unfortunate, as many could benefit from such services.”

The failure to seek help is not unique among Hong Kong professionals. A U.S. study on depression and stress within the accounting profession revealed that CPAs seemed particularly reluctant to seek treatment. “Some fear they will be seen as weak or unreliable, others

believe they should be able to handle their own problems just as they handle their clients' problems,” states the report conducted by the Texas Society of CPAs in the United States in 2007.

Black Dog blues

- Feeling miserable or anxious
- Feeling exhausted with little energy
- Feeling like a failure or guilty much of the time
- Feeling like a burden to others
- Life isn't worth living
- Feeling irritable and angry
- Lacking confidence
- Feeling that you always have and always will make mistakes
- Life is passing you by
- Difficulty thinking clearly
- Difficulty sleeping
- The smallest of tasks or social activity feels hard or impossible
- No future and a loss of hope

Research indicates that there is no single explanation for depression. An estimated 70,000 people in Hong Kong are believed to suffer from it and the number rises to 121 million globally.

Statistically, a person is more susceptible if there is a history of depression in the family and women are twice more likely to suffer than men. They are, however, more willing to seek help and more likely to take antidepressants.

Yu says sufferers usually have low energy levels, find it hard to concentrate, process information and make decisions. They also have trouble regulating their moods.

According to the Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention at the University of Hong Kong, Asians are particularly prone to complaining about mood problems that manifest themselves physically rather than psychologically, such as feeling tired or agitated. “Many calls to doctors in fact reflect symptoms of depression or anxiety,” says Yu.

One simple way to avoid or deal with mild depression is to take regular exercise, such as brisk walks or yoga, so that the brain releases endorphins and other mood-enhancing chemicals. “This helps put things in perspective and avoids the pitfall of over-emphasizing the negatives of life and overlooking the positives,” says Yu. “Rising early and basking for 15 minutes in the sun is also beneficial. This should be done daily if possible.”

Yu says sufferers can try to divert their minds and emotions by talking to friends, finding practical solutions to problems and engaging in creative activities, from Sudoku to dance classes or painting.

Some sufferers resort to “self-medicating” with alcohol as a quick fix. Research conducted by London's Priory Group of psychiatric hospitals revealed that nearly 25 percent of adults drink when they're depressed. Alcohol can

Where to get help

ReSource The Counselling Centre Ltd.

www.resourcecounselling.org
ReSource has served the Hong Kong public for more than 30 years and has 13 expatriate and local Chinese counsellors.

Dr. Melanie Byron, Psy. D Mind Matters

www.mindmatters.hk

Hong Kong Mood Disorders Centre, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

www.hmdc.med.cuhk.edu.hk/main.html
Offers cognitive therapy and provides a live phone line with screening and referral to trained doctors.

Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention

<http://csrp.hku.hk>

Little Prince is Depressed

www.depression.edu.hk

A website supported by The University of Hong Kong and The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, which, through a story about a depressed prince, gives practical help and advice on understanding and overcoming depression.

temporarily lift one's mood but makes depression worse in the long run. Other quick fixes such as sugar, tobacco and caffeine are in fact depressants and should also be avoided.

"Overeating, spending too much time on computer games, gambling, shopping and drinking too much end up making life more miserable," Yu says.

Eating properly helps. Research indicates that food containing Omega-3s – the fatty acids found in oily fish and flaxseed oil – can improve moods. Another alternative treatment is St. John's wort, a herbal remedy believed to be a natural antidepressant, though it hasn't been scientifically proven.

Family and friends may find it hard to cope with someone who is dispirited, but patience and understanding are vital. "Pay attention and listen," recommends Yu. "Accept that their difficulties are genuine to them, no matter how insignificant they look to you. Brainstorm to solve problems and

avoid criticism. Appreciate their courage, effort and achievement in facing the difficulties, no matter how small."

If depression persists, antidepressants and therapy are the next course of action. The World Health Organization claims that in Southeast Asia, many cases of depression remain under-treated, despite antidepressants being affordable and available, because sufferers either don't want to take medication or believe the disease is incurable.

"Some Asians are reluctant to take antidepressants, thinking they can get addicted," says Yu. "In Hong Kong, other kinds of psychiatric drugs are often prescribed along with antidepressants. For severely depressed people, drugs are absolutely necessary. Nothing can act as quickly and effectively to help improve their thinking and mood."

Contrary to common belief, antidepressants aren't addictive, but they can cause side effects, such as a dry mouth, nausea, anxiety, insomnia,

dizziness, sexual dysfunction, apathy, heart palpitations and headaches. They don't actually cure depression either, instead they help raise a patient's functioning level to a point where other forms of therapy can take effect.

"Research has demonstrated that a combination of medication and therapy is most effective in treating depression," says Yu. "But if the sufferer has to choose one of the two, therapy is generally more effective if he or she is not severely depressed."

Psychotherapy or counselling involves examining the possible causes of depression and changing a sufferer's mindset. A therapist can help dispel negative thoughts and induce positive self-talk.

"Every client requires specific tailoring depending on personality factors, their level of insight and their motivation for change," Yu says.

In seeking help sooner rather than later, it is possible to send the "Black Dog" packing for good.