

Overview: Understanding Depression

Everyone occasionally feels sad or down. These feelings are typically short-lived and pass within a few days. If you continuously feel sad, hopeless and lost for weeks, months or even years it is likely that you have some form of depression. Many people with depression never seek treatment and may live in a depressed state.

What is depression?

Depression is a medical illness that causes a constant feeling of sadness and loss of interest. It can affect the way you feel, think and behave. Depression can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems. You may have trouble doing normal day-to-day activities and depression may make you feel as if life isn't worth living.

Depression isn't a weakness or something that you can "snap out" of. It's a chronic illness that usually requires long-term treatment, similar to diabetes or high blood pressure.

Types of depression

Like any illness, depression involves a variety of symptoms and can vary in severity.

Major depression is a combination of symptoms that interfere with a person's ability to work, sleep, eat, and enjoy activities. Major depression is disabling and prevents a person from functioning normally. Some people may experience only a single episode within their lifetime, but more often a person may have multiple episodes.

- **Dysthymic disorder**, or dysthymia is characterized by long-term (two years or more) symptoms that may not be severe enough to disable a person but can prevent normal functioning or feeling well. People with dysthymia may also experience one or more episodes of major depression during their lifetime.
- **Bipolar disorder**, or manic depressive illness is fairly uncommon. Bipolar disorder is characterized by cycling mood changes—from extreme highs to extreme lows. Bipolar disorder usually lasts a lifetime. Episodes of mania and depression typically come back over time. Between episodes, many people with bipolar disorder are free of symptoms, but some people may have lingering symptoms.

Most people with a major depressive episode suffer the symptoms noted above, but some episodes can be severe enough to distort thinking and include psychotic symptoms where the individual has disturbing false beliefs, a break with reality (delusions), or hears or sees upsetting things that others cannot hear or see.

Don't wait to be evaluated or treated for depression. The sooner you begin treatment the sooner you can begin to start feeling better.

Other depressive episodes occur in connection with specific events such as:

- **Postpartum depression**—more serious than having “the baby blues” that many women experience after giving birth, postpartum depression is when hormonal and physical changes occur and the new responsibility of caring for a newborn can be overwhelming. Symptoms may include difficulty sleeping, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, thoughts of suicide or harming the baby. Treatment can easily correct postpartum depression.
- **Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)**—characterized by the onset of depression during the winter months, when there is less natural sunlight. Depression generally lifts during spring and summer. SAD may be effectively treated with light therapy, but nearly half of those with SAD do not get better with light therapy alone. Antidepressant medication and psychotherapy can reduce SAD symptoms, either alone or in combination with light therapy.

What causes depression?

Depression is most likely caused by a combination of genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors. It is unknown exactly what causes depression but many factors may be involved including:

- **Biological differences.** People with depression appear to have physical changes in their brains. The significance of these changes is uncertain, but may eventually help identify the cause.
- **Chemical make-up.** Known as neurotransmitters, these naturally occurring brain chemicals linked to mood are thought to play a direct role in depression.
- **Hormones.** Changes in the body’s balance of hormones may be involved in causing or triggering depression. Hormone changes can result from thyroid problems, menopause or a number of other conditions.
- **Inherited traits.** Depression is more common in people whose family members also have this condition. Researchers are trying to find genes that may be involved in causing depression.
- **Life events.** Certain events, such as the death or loss of a loved one, financial problems and high levels of stress, can trigger depression.
- **Early childhood trauma.** Traumatic events during childhood, such as abuse or loss of a parent, can cause permanent changes in the brain that can make a person more susceptible to depression.



Symptoms of depression:

ADULTS

Depression affects each person differently, causing symptoms to vary from person to person. Symptoms include:

- Feeling hopeless
- Sad, anxious or feeling empty
- Difficulty concentrating
- Aches or pains
- Headaches
- Overeating or appetite loss
- Difficulty sleeping or excessive sleeping
- Excessive crying
- Angry outbursts
- Slowed thinking, speaking or body movements

CHILDREN & TEENS

Depression symptoms in teens and children are different than adults.

Symptoms include:

- Poor performance in school
- Constant worrying
- Efforts or threats of running away from home
- Outbursts of irritability, shouting or crying
- Angry or aggressive behavior
- Use of drugs or alcohol
- Social isolation
- Overly sensitive, fear of rejection or failure
- Reckless behavior

Who is at risk for depression?

Depression can impact many different people and is fairly common among middle-aged and senior men and women. It also can impact children and teens.

Women

Nearly twice as many women compared to men, are affected by a depressive disorder each year.¹

Women are more likely to be diagnosed with depression than men. Biological, life cycle, hormonal, and psychosocial factors experienced by women may be linked to the cause of depression in women.

As women transition into menopause, some women may experience an increased risk for depression. Additionally osteoporosis which is bone thinning or loss may also be associated with depression.

Women face the stress of balancing work and home schedules. Women are more likely to be responsible to care for children and aging family members. Some women may become withdrawn from close friends and family and may show signs of loss of interest in activities that were once enjoyable.

Men

More than 6 million men are known to have depression each year in the United States.¹

Men often experience depression differently than women and are likely to have different symptoms of depression from women. Men tend to become extremely exhausted, irritable, loss of interest in activities and may have difficulty sleeping. Men are more likely to turn to alcohol or drugs when they are depressed. They also can become frustrated, discouraged, angry and sometimes abusive. Some men throw themselves into their work to avoid talking about their feelings of depression with family or friends.

Older Adults

17.5% of people who are ages 85 and older committed suicide in 2010.²

Older adults have an increased chance of experiencing depression. Depression is not a normal part of aging and studies show that most seniors feel satisfied with their lives, despite having more illnesses or physical problems. However, when older adults have depression, it tends to be overlooked because signs of depression in seniors are less obvious. They may be less likely to experience or admit to feeling sad or down.

Older adults may also have medical conditions such as heart disease, stroke, or cancer which increase the chances for depression. Many different medications can also cause side effects that contribute to depression. Depressed seniors have an increased risk and overall higher rate of suicide.

Children

11.2% of 13 to 18 year olds in the United States at some point are affected by depressive disorder.¹

Children who develop depression may pretend to be sick, refuse to go to school, cling to a parent, or worry that a parent may die. Older children may sulk, get into trouble at school, be negative and irritable, and feel misunderstood. Depression during the teenage years comes at a time of personal change. Girls and boys are forming an identity separate from their parents. They may struggle with gender issues and emerging sexuality. Teenagers are faced with making independent decisions for the first time. Depression in teenagers frequently co-occurs with other disorders such as anxiety, eating disorders and substance abuse.¹

1. National Institute of Mental Health 2010

2. Figures from the Centers for Disease Control for the year 2010.

Moving Forward

Supporting a Loved One

Do you know someone who might be depressed? Try to help and encourage him or her to see a doctor or a mental health professional.

- Offer support, understanding, patience and encouragement
- Talk and listen carefully
- Never ignore comments about suicide
- Invite him or her out for a walk, or other activities
- Remind him or her that with time and treatment, the depression will lift.

Recognize and Overcome Depression

Overcoming a difficult time in your life can be hard. Depression is more than just feeling bad or upset after a troubling event. It is a serious medical condition and is very common.

Depression is one of the most treatable illnesses. And this often happens in just a few weeks, given the right care. There is no reason to feel sad, down and worthless. Choose to focus on you and get the help you need.

Next Steps

If you are depressed or think you may be depressed and feel hopeless, exhausted and helpless you should learn about what options are available for you. You can call your program or visit us online to find the right resources and other tools that may help. You may also think about seeking professional help through a doctor or mental health professional. There are different treatment options including medication and psychotherapy. You are not alone and help is a phone call away. Take the next steps to begin feeling better about yourself.



Employee Assistance Program
1-800-424-6015