

Understanding Depression

Feeling down from time to time is a normal part of life. But when emptiness and despair take hold and won't go away, it may be depression. More than just the temporary "blues," the lows of depression make it tough to function and enjoy life like you once did. Hobbies and friends don't interest you like they used to; you're exhausted all the time; and just getting through the day can be overwhelming. When you're depressed, things may feel hopeless, but with help and support you *can* get better. But first, you need to understand depression. Learning about depression—including its signs, symptoms, causes, and treatment—is the first step to overcoming the problem.

What is depression?

We all go through ups and downs in our mood. Sadness is a normal reaction to life's struggles, setbacks, and disappointments. Many people use the word "depression" to explain these kinds of feelings, but depression is much more than just sadness.

Some people describe depression as "living in a black hole" or having a feeling of impending doom. However, some depressed people don't feel sad at all—they may feel lifeless, empty, and apathetic, or men in particular may even feel angry, aggressive, and restless.

Whatever the symptoms, depression is different from normal sadness in that it engulfs your day-to-day life, interfering with your ability to work, study, eat, sleep, and have fun. The feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and worthlessness are intense and unrelenting, with little, if any, relief.

Are you depressed?

If you identify with several of the following signs and symptoms, and they just won't go away, you may be suffering from clinical depression.

- you can't sleep or you sleep too much
- you can't concentrate or find that previously easy tasks are now difficult
- you feel hopeless and helpless
- you can't control your negative thoughts, no matter how much you try
- you have lost your appetite or you can't stop eating
- you are much more irritable, short-tempered, or aggressive than usual
- you're consuming more alcohol than normal or engaging in other reckless behavior
- you have thoughts that life is not worth living (Seek help *immediately* if this is the case)

Signs and symptoms of depression

Depression varies from person to person, but there are some common signs and symptoms. It's important to remember that these symptoms can be part of life's normal lows. But the more symptoms you have, the stronger they are, and the longer they've lasted—the more likely it is that you're dealing with depression. When these symptoms are overwhelming and disabling, that's when it's time to seek help.

Common signs and symptoms of depression

- **Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.** A bleak outlook—nothing will ever get better and there's nothing you can do to improve your situation.
- **Loss of interest in daily activities.** No interest in former hobbies, pastimes, social activities, or sex. You've lost your ability to feel joy and pleasure.
- **Appetite or weight changes.** Significant weight loss or weight gain—a change of more than 5% of body weight in a month.
- **Sleep changes.** Either insomnia, especially waking in the early hours of the morning, or oversleeping (also known as hypersomnia).
- **Anger or irritability.** Feeling agitated, restless, or even violent. Your tolerance level is low, your temper short, and everything and everyone gets on your nerves.
- **Loss of energy.** Feeling fatigued, sluggish, and physically drained. Your whole body may feel heavy, and even small tasks are exhausting or take longer to complete.
- **Self-loathing.** Strong feelings of worthlessness or guilt. You harshly criticize yourself for perceived faults and mistakes.
- **Reckless behavior.** You engage in escapist behavior such as substance abuse, compulsive gambling, reckless driving, or dangerous sports.
- **Concentration problems.** Trouble focusing, making decisions, or remembering things.
- **Unexplained aches and pains.** An increase in physical complaints such as headaches, back pain, aching muscles, and stomach pain.

Depression and suicide

Depression is a major risk factor for suicide. The deep despair and hopelessness that goes along with depression can make suicide feel like the only way to escape the pain. Thoughts of death or suicide are a serious symptom of depression, so take any suicidal talk or behavior seriously. It's not just a warning sign that the person is thinking about suicide: it's a cry for help.

Warning signs of suicide include:

- Talking about killing or harming one's self
- Expressing strong feelings of hopelessness or being trapped
- An unusual preoccupation with death or dying
- Acting recklessly, as if they have a death wish (e.g. speeding through red lights)

- Calling or visiting people to say goodbye
- Getting affairs in order (giving away prized possessions, tying up loose ends)
- Saying things like "Everyone would be better off without me" or "I want out."
- A sudden switch from being extremely depressed to acting calm and happy.

If you think a friend or family member is considering suicide, express your concern and seek professional help immediately. Talking openly about suicidal thoughts and feelings can save a life.

If You Are Feeling Suicidal...

When you're feeling extremely depressed or suicidal, problems don't seem temporary—they seem overwhelming and permanent. But with time, you will feel better, especially if you reach out for help. If you are feeling suicidal, know that there are many people who want to support you during this difficult time, so please reach out for help!

Depression causes and risk factors

Some illnesses have a specific medical cause, making treatment straightforward. If you have diabetes, you take insulin. If you have appendicitis, you have surgery. But depression is more complicated. Depression is not just the result of a chemical imbalance in the brain, and is not simply cured with medication. Experts believe that depression is caused by a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors. In other words, your lifestyle choices, relationships, and coping skills matter just as much—if not more so—than genetics. However, certain risk factors make you more vulnerable to depression.

Causes and risk factors for depression

- Loneliness
- Lack of social support
- Recent stressful life experiences
- Family history of depression
- Marital or relationship problems
- Financial strain
- Early childhood trauma or abuse
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Unemployment or underemployment
- Health problems or chronic pain

The cause of your depression helps determine the treatment

Understanding the underlying cause of your depression may help you overcome the problem. For example, if you are depressed because of a dead end job, the best treatment might be finding a more satisfying career, not taking an antidepressant. If you are new to an area and feeling lonely and sad, finding new friends at work or through a hobby will probably give you more of a mood boost than going to therapy. In such cases, the depression is remedied by changing the situation.

The road to depression recovery

Just as the symptoms and causes of depression are different in different people, so are the ways to feel better. What works for one person might not work for another, and no one treatment is appropriate in all cases. If you recognize the signs of depression in yourself or a loved one, take some time to explore the many treatment options. In most cases, the best approach involves a combination of social support, lifestyle changes, emotional skills building, and professional help.

Ask for help and support

If even the thought of tackling your depression seems overwhelming, don't panic. Feeling helpless and hopeless is a symptom of depression—not the reality of your situation. It does *not* mean that you're weak or you can't change! The key to depression recovery is to start small and *ask for help*. Having a strong support system in place will speed your recovery. Isolation fuels depression, so reach out to others, even when you feel like being alone. Let your family and friends know what you're going through and how they can support you.

Make healthy lifestyle changes

Lifestyle changes are not always easy to make, but they can have a big impact on depression. Lifestyle changes that can be very effective include:

- Cultivating supportive relationships
- Getting regular exercise and sleep
- Eating healthfully to naturally boost mood
- Managing stress
- Practicing relaxation techniques
- Challenging negative thought patterns

Build emotional skills

Many people lack the skills needed to manage stress and balance emotions. Building emotional skills can give you the ability to cope and bounce back from adversity, trauma, and loss. In other words, learning how to recognize and express your emotions can make you more resilient.

Seek professional help

If support from family and friends, positive lifestyle changes, and emotional skills building aren't enough, seek help from a mental health professional. There are many effective treatments for depression, including therapy, medication, and alternative treatments. Learning about your options will help you decide what measures are most likely to work best for your particular situation and needs.

Are antidepressants right for you?

Medication can help relieve the symptoms of depression in some people, but they aren't a cure and they come with drawbacks of their own. Learning the facts about antidepressants and weighing the benefits against the risks can help you make an informed and personal decision about whether medication is right for you.

Effective treatment for depression often includes some form of therapy. Therapy gives you tools to treat depression from a variety of angles. Also, what you learn in therapy gives you skills and insight to prevent depression from coming back.

Some types of therapy teach you practical techniques on how to reframe negative thinking and employ behavioral skills in combating depression. Therapy can also help you work through the root of your depression, helping you understand why you feel a certain way, what your triggers are for depression, and what you can do to stay healthy.

Source: http://helpguide.org/mental/depression_signs_types_diagnosis_treatment.htm