



Depression and Your Mental Health

What is Depression?

Depression (major depressive disorder) is a common and serious medical illness that negatively affects how you feel, the way you think and how you act. Fortunately, it is also treatable. Depression causes feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed. It can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems and can decrease your ability to function at work and at home. Depression affects an estimated one in 15 adults (6.7%) in any given year with higher rates seen in the AI/AN population. Depression can occur at any time, but on average, first appears during the late teens to mid-20s. Women are more likely than men to experience depression.

Depression symptoms can vary from mild to severe and can include the following.

- Feeling sad or having a depressed mood.
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed.
- Changes in appetite - weight loss or gain unrelated to dieting.
- Trouble sleeping or sleeping too much.
- Loss of energy or increased fatigue.
- Increase in purposeless physical activity (e.g., inability to sit still, pacing, handwringing) or slowed movements or speech (these actions must be severe enough to be observable by others).
- Feeling worthless or guilty.
- Difficulty thinking, concentrating, or making decisions.
- Thoughts of death or suicide.

Symptoms must last at least 2 weeks and must represent a change in your previous level of functioning for a diagnosis of depression. Also, medical conditions (e.g., thyroid problems, a brain tumor or vitamin deficiency) can mimic symptoms of depression so it is important to rule out general medical causes. A PHQ-9 patient questionnaire screens for depression and can help identify the severity of depression.

Depression symptoms in children and teens

Common signs and symptoms of depression in children and teenagers are like those of adults, but there can be some differences.

- In younger children, symptoms of depression may include sadness, irritability, clinginess, worry, aches, pains, refusing to go to school, or being underweight.
- In teens, symptoms may include sadness, irritability, feeling negative and worthless, anger, poor performance or poor attendance at school, feeling misunderstood and extremely sensitive, using recreational drugs or alcohol, eating or sleeping too much, self-harm, loss of interest in normal activities, and avoidance of social interaction.

Depression symptoms in older adults (Elders)

Depression is not a normal part of growing older, and it should never be taken lightly. Unfortunately, depression often goes undiagnosed and untreated in older adults, and they may feel reluctant to seek help. Symptoms of depression may be different or less obvious in older adults and can include the following.

- Memory difficulties or personality changes.
- Physical aches or pain.
- Fatigue, loss of appetite, sleep problems - not caused by a medical condition or medication.
- Often wanting to stay at home, rather than going out to socialize or doing new things.
- Suicidal thinking or feelings, especially in older men.

Causes of Depression

It's not known exactly what causes depression. As with many mental disorders, a variety of factors may be involved, such as the following.

- Certain personality traits, such as low self-esteem and being too dependent, self-critical, or pessimistic.
- Traumatic or stressful events, such as physical or sexual abuse, the death or loss of a loved one, a difficult relationship, or financial problems.
- Blood relatives with a history of depression, bipolar disorder, alcoholism, or suicide.
- Being lesbian, gay, bisexual in an unsupportive situation.
- History of other mental health disorders, such as anxiety disorder, eating disorders or post-traumatic stress disorder.
- Abuse of alcohol or recreational drugs.
- Serious or chronic illness, including cancer, stroke, chronic pain or heart disease.

Differences Between Depression and Grieving

The death of a loved one, loss of a job, or the ending of a relationship are difficult experiences for a person to endure. Feelings of sadness or grief are normal in response to such situations. Those experiencing loss often might describe themselves as being “depressed.”

But being sad is not the same as having depression. The grieving process is natural and unique to everyone and shares some of the same features of depression. Distinguishing between grief and depression is important and can assist people in getting the help, support, or treatment they need.

Both grief and depression may involve intense sadness and withdrawal from usual activities. They are also different in important ways:

- In grief, painful feelings come in waves, often intermixed with positive memories of the deceased. In major depression, mood and/or interest (pleasure) are decreased for most of 2 weeks.
- In grief, self-esteem is usually maintained. In major depression, feelings of worthlessness and self-loathing are common.
- In grief, thoughts of death may surface when thinking of or fantasizing about “joining” the deceased loved one. In major depression, thoughts are focused on ending one’s life due to feeling worthless or undeserving of living or being unable to cope with the pain of depression.

Grief and depression can co-exist. For some people, the death of a loved one, losing a job, being a victim of a physical assault, or a major disaster can lead to depression. When grief and depression co-occur, the grief is more severe and lasts longer than grief without depression.

Complications of Untreated Depression

Depression is a serious disorder that can take a terrible toll on you and your family. Depression often worsens if it isn’t treated, resulting in emotional, behavioral, and health problems that affect every area of your life.

Examples of complications associated with depression include

- excess weight or obesity, which can lead to heart disease and diabetes.
- pain or physical illness.
- alcohol or drug misuse.
- family conflicts, relationship difficulties, and work or school problems.
- social isolation.
- suicidal feelings, suicide attempts or suicide.
- self-harm or self-mutilation, such as cutting.
- premature death from medical conditions.



Depression is among the most treatable of mental disorders. Between 80% and 90% percent of people with depression eventually respond well to treatment.

How Is Depression Treated?

Medications for Depression - "Antidepressants"

Brain chemistry may contribute to an individual's depression and may factor into their treatment. For this reason, antidepressants might be prescribed to help modify one's brain chemistry. **These medications are NOT** sedatives, "uppers" or tranquilizers. They **are NOT habit-forming**.

Antidepressants may produce some improvement within the first week or two of use, yet full benefits may not be seen for two to three months. It is important to let your doctor know if a medication does not work or if you experience side effects. Psychiatrists usually recommend that patients continue to take medication for six or more months after the symptoms have improved. Longer-term maintenance treatment may be suggested to decrease the risk of future episodes for certain people at high risk.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy or "talk therapy," is sometimes used alone for treatment of mild depression; for moderate to severe depression, psychotherapy is often used along with antidepressant medications. Talking can help a person to recognize distorted/negative thinking with the goal of changing thoughts and behaviors to respond to challenges in a more positive manner.

Psychotherapy may involve only the individual, but it can include others. For example, family or couples therapy can help address issues within these close relationships. In many cases, significant improvement can be made in 10 to 15 sessions.

All material in this handout was provided by Lori Raney, M.D. owner of Collaborative Care Consulting, LLC.

Self-help and Coping

People can do several things to help reduce the symptoms of depression. For many people,

- participating in regular exercise helps create positive feeling and improves mood.
- getting enough quality sleep on a regular basis maintains optimal health and well-being.
- eating a healthy diet leads to more energy and alertness.
- avoiding alcohol (a depressant) can also help reduce symptoms of depression.
- talking to friends and loved ones or a minister, spiritual leader, or someone else in your faith community increases connections to people and shared experiences.

When to get help and emergency help for Depression and Suicidal Thinking

If you feel depressed, make an appointment to see your doctor or mental health professional as soon as you can. If you're reluctant to seek treatment, talk to a friend or loved one, any health care professional, a faith leader, or someone else you trust.

Consider these options if you're having suicidal thoughts:

- Call your doctor or mental health professional.
- Contact a suicide hotline.
 - In the U.S., call, or text 988 the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, which is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Services are free and confidential.