

# DEPRESSION

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## What is depression?

It's normal to feel sad at times, but clinical depression is a serious disorder requiring treatment. You can't just "snap out of" clinical depression – it's an illness, not a sign of weakness. Depression is associated with reduced levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin, impairing the body's ability to respond quickly to external situations. In other words, your brain cannot respond appropriately to information from the external world that unceasingly bombards the senses. Fortunately, antidepressant medication can restore chemical balance in the brain by raising the level of serotonin. Tackling the root of depression through medication and counseling is important for the well-being of the whole person. In fact, depression not only causes emotional changes, but also affects behavior, physical health and appearance, academic performance, social activity and the ability to handle everyday situations. Women are twice as likely as men to suffer depression.

## What causes depression?

Not all causes of depression are known, but scientists generally agree that certain biological and environmental factors increase the likelihood of depression. Studies have shown that individuals with depressed family members are more likely to develop the disorder. Biological factors include personality traits, chemical imbalances in the brain, and changing hormone levels. You are more likely to suffer depression if you are pessimistic, have poor coping skills, or have low self-esteem.

Elements of your environment that may contribute to depression are difficult life events, such as divorce of your parents or death of a loved one, physical illness, and lack of support from friends and family. Although behavior patterns are usually a result of genetics and environment, they too can be considered causes of depression. Such behavior includes abusing alcohol or drugs and holding unrealistic expectations.

## What are the symptoms of depression?

If you experience symptoms of depression for more than two weeks it's very important to seek help.

### **Emotional**

- Sadness or pessimism
- Feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness

- Irritability, anger, worry, agitation, anxiety, guilt
- Recurring thoughts of death or suicide

### **Physical**

- Loss of energy, persistent lethargy
- Headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pains that don't respond to medical treatment

### **Behavioral**

- Changes in appetite and sleep patterns
- Impaired ability to concentrate, remember, or make decisions
- Inability to take pleasure in former interests; social withdrawal
- Using alcohol or drugs to “feel better”

### **What is bipolar disorder?**

Also known as manic depression, bipolar disorder is characterized by extreme changes in mood, thought, energy and behavior. It is more than just mood swings. Severe emotional changes can last for hours to months. Unlike people who suffer clinical depression, manic-depressives experience “highs” distinguished by periods of mania, which are intense bursts of energy or euphoria. In such a manic state, patients usually experience extreme optimism, self-confidence, aggression, and grandiose delusions. Thoughts race through their minds and they feel little need for sleep. They exhibit poor judgment, short attention spans, and risky behavior.

Manic depression usually appears during adolescence, but people of all ages can suffer from the disorder. Research has found that bi-polar disorder affects an equal number of men and women, and it's found in all races, ethnic groups and social classes. Like clinical depression, bi-polar disorder often runs in families.

### **What is Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)?**

Seasonal affective disorder is a form of depression that affects people during part of the year when they aren't exposed to much daylight. A lack of light disturbs the neurotransmitter systems. Similar to other types of depression, SAD causes changed sleeping and eating patterns, loss of interest in sex, social withdrawal, pessimism, and inability to concentrate. Students who suffer SAD may notice a drop in grades during the winter. Therapy and medication used to treat ordinary depression works for SAD, but the most effective treatment plans address the root of the disorder by exposing the eyes to certain wavelengths of light.

### **What is the treatment for depression?**

The most common and effective means for treatment is a combination of psychotherapy and medication. A good therapist can help you modify behavioral and emotional patterns that contribute to your illness. Medication improves your ability to cope with life's problems and restores your sense of judgment. Some patients fear that using drugs will change their personality, but most people who take antidepressants find relief and "feel like themselves" again.

### **What can I do to relieve feelings of depression?**

Many find exercise helpful in relieving depression. Others find help through laughter, perhaps from a funny movie, and hanging around people they like. Avoid pessimists who worry excessively. Participate in activities you enjoy, write a journal, and keep pictures of your favorite people with you. Bear in mind that clinical depression requires professional treatment, and these self-help tips may have limited effect on your mood if you suffer a chemical imbalance in the brain.

### **How can I help a friend who may be depressed?**

Having support from friends and family is essential for individuals suffering depression. Remember that you aren't responsible for your friend's depression, but you can help alleviate the symptoms. Show you care and want to find help for your friend. However, be careful not to be overbearing and controlling – your most important role is as a listener. As you listen to your friend, be supportive – don't deny or minimize your friend's pain. Be honest that your friend's behavior worries you because it's not a trivial problem, but remind him or her that depression is a highly treatable disorder that affects many people. When discussing the subject, stay calm and withdraw if you start getting frustrated by your friend's denial or lack of change.

**If you would like to talk about any of these issues, call the Counseling Center at (336) 316-2163.**

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