



UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION

Everyone feels sad or “down” occasionally, and these feelings usually go away after a few days. If you are feeling sad for reasons that you can pinpoint—disappointment, grief, and so on—this is a normal reaction. This is what is called “situational depression,” meaning that the feelings are in response to a definable situation.

If you find yourself feeling sad for long periods of time, and it is hard for you to function like you used to, you may be clinically depressed. Clinical depression takes over your life, and impacts many areas of your functioning. You may experience:

- Dramatic change in sleep patterns (sleeping a lot or unable to sleep)
- Significant change in eating patterns or change in body size
- Lack of interest in activities that you used to enjoy (including sex)
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling very sluggish or restless—so much so that other people notice
- Feeling worthless or excessively guilty about something
- Fatigue or low energy level almost every day
- Feeling hopeless
- Feeling irritable or having a “hair-trigger” temper
- A sense that life is not worth living, or thoughts of suicide (if this is the case, seek help *immediately*)

Depression is a complicated illness—it is not easily traced to a specific biological or chemical cause. It is thought that depression is caused by a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors. There are some risk factors that have been connected to depression—making lifestyle changes to shift these risk factors may help:

- Genetics:** Have any of your family members experienced from depression?
- Early childhood trauma or abuse:** Did you experience emotional or physical trauma when you were young?
- Loneliness and lack of social support:** Do you have people you can turn to in stressful times?
- Recent stressful or traumatic life experiences:** Has anything “big” happened lately? (loss of a loved one, changed where you live/work/attend school, etc.)
- Alcohol and drugs:** Are you using chemicals to help yourself feel better? Alcohol and drugs can cause strong depressive symptoms, and make you more vulnerable to depression.
- Finances and employment:** Do you have enough income to meet your needs?
- Health problems or chronic pain:** Is something happening with your body that affects how you function in the world and your ability to interact with people?

Men and women experience depression differently. Women tend to be aware of feelings of sadness or “feeling blue.” They may experience depression connected to hormonal changes, such as postpartum depression, severe premenstrual syndrome, and depression during the transition into menopause. Many women face multiple

responsibilities of work and home, childcare and care for aging parents, abuse, and so on. For some women, these stressors may lead to depression.

Men often experience depression differently than women. They are less likely than women to acknowledge feelings of sadness, self-loathing or loneliness. They may acknowledge feeling fatigued or irritable, problems with sleep patterns, or a lack of “gusto.” They may become frustrated, discouraged, irritable, or angry—responses more socially acceptable for men than talking about feelings. Men may work longer hours to avoid talking about their depression. Although depression occurs almost twice as often in women as in men, men are at a higher risk for suicide.

Older adults often experience depression, although it is not a natural part of aging. Some seniors are dissatisfied with their lives, or may have medical conditions which cause depression. The diagnosis may be overlooked because seniors may show different, less obvious symptoms than younger adults.

Children and adolescents may also become depressed. Young children may pretend to be sick, refuse to go to school, and worry that their parents may die. Older children may sulk, get into trouble, be negative and irritable, and feel misunderstood. These symptoms in teens may be attributed to normal teenage mood swings; if so, the diagnosis of depression may be missed.

What Can I do if I Feel Depressed?

Depression is a highly treatable disorder. The earlier treatment begins the more effective it will be. The first step is to visit a doctor to rule out any medical conditions or medication side-effects. At that point you may decide to take medication, begin psychotherapy, or both. There are also ways you can help yourself, such as:

- engage in mild activity and exercise
- get enough sleep
- cultivate supportive relationships
- eat a healthy diet
- set realistic goals for yourself
- challenge your negative thought patterns (journaling is helpful)



There is no need to suffer through depression. Explore different treatment options. Make lifestyle changes. Seek professional help.

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Sources

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