



Understanding Depression

In any given 1-year period, 9.5 percent of the population, or about 18.8 million American adults, suffer from a depressive illness. The cost to an employer for this disorder is high, but the cost in human suffering cannot be estimated. Depressive illnesses often interfere with normal functioning and cause pain and suffering not only to those who have a disorder, but also to those who care about them. Serious depression can affect every aspect of one's life. But much of this suffering is unnecessary. Most people do not seek treatment, although most can be helped. Thanks to years of research, there are now medications and psychosocial therapies such as cognitive/behavioral, "talk," or interpersonal that ease the pain of depression.

Signs and Symptoms of depression include:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being "slowed down"
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- Insomnia, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping
- Drastic weight changes or appetite
- Thoughts of death or suicide; suicide attempts
- Restlessness, irritability
- Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain

Some types of depression run in families, suggesting that vulnerability can be inherited. This seems to be the case with bipolar disorder.

In some families, major depression also seems to occur generation after generation. However, it can also occur in people who have no family history of depression. Whether inherited or not, major depressive disorder is often associated with changes in brain structures or brain function.

People who have low self-esteem are prone to depression.

In recent years, researchers have shown that physical changes in the body can be accompanied by mental changes as well. Also, a serious loss, difficult relationship, financial problem, or any stressful (unwelcomed or even desired) change in life patterns can trigger a depressive episode. Very often, a combination of genetic, psychological, and environmental factors is involved in the onset of a depressive disorder.

Helping Yourself

- Break large tasks into small ones, set some priorities, and do what you can as you can.
- Try to be with other people and to confide in someone; it is usually better than being alone and secretive.
- Participate in activities that may make you feel better.
- Mild exercise, going to a movie, a ballgame, or participating in social, or other activities may help.
- Feeling better takes time. Expect your mood to improve gradually, not immediately.
- You should postpone important decisions until the depression has passed. Before deciding to make a significant transition-change jobs, get married or divorced-discuss it with others who know you well and have a more objective view of your situation.
- It is rare for people to just "snap out of" a depression. But they can feel a little better each day.
- Remember, positive thinking will replace the negative thinking that is part of the depression and will disappear as your depression responds to treatment.
- Let your friends and family help you.