

Live Well, Work Well

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Mental Health: Depression

Everyone occasionally has bouts of sadness, but these feelings are usually temporary. When a person has a depressive disorder, it interferes with daily life. Depression is a common but serious illness.

There is no single cause of depression, but it likely results from a mix of genetic, biochemical, environmental and psychological factors. Depression commonly coexists with other illnesses, such as anxiety disorders or substance abuse. It can affect anyone at any time, including children.

Types of Depression

There are several forms of depressive disorders, the most common being the first two listed below.

- **Major depressive disorder**—characterized by a combination of symptoms that interfere with a person’s daily life. It is disabling and prevents a person from functioning normally
- **Dysthymic disorder**—also called dysthymia, it is long-term (two years or longer) feelings of depression that are not extremely severe, but still prevent a person from normal functions of daily life.
- **Psychotic depression**—occurs in conjunction with a form of psychosis, such as hallucinations or delusions.
- **Postpartum depression**—can occur within a year of giving birth. Symptoms include sadness, lack of energy, trouble concentrating, anxiety, and feelings of guilt.
- **Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)**—characterized by the onset of depression commonly during the fall and winter months, when there is less natural sunlight. SAD can also occur in the summer.

Symptoms

People with depressive illnesses do not all experience the same symptoms. The severity, frequency and duration will vary depending on the individual and the illness. Symptoms may include the following:

- Persistent sad, anxious or “empty” feelings
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness and/or hopelessness
- Irritability, restlessness and/or fatigue
- Loss of interest in activities once found pleasurable
- A dramatic change in appetite
- Insomnia
- Thoughts of suicide

Diagnosis and Treatment

Depression is a treatable disorder. The first step is to visit a doctor for a medical examination to rule out other factors that may be causing the condition, such as medications or a thyroid disorder. Once diagnosed, a person will likely be treated with psychotherapy and/or medication. In the meantime, it is important to exercise regularly, participate in activities, spend time with friends and family, and think positively. It is wise to postpone major decisions, such as marriage or a career change, until feeling better.

Helping Those Affected

In addition to helping a person get an appropriate diagnosis and treatment, you can provide other help:

- Offer emotional support, patience and encouragement.
- Be a good listener.
- Never ignore comments about suicide; report them to the person’s relative(s) or doctor, or call the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988.

- Invite the person to do things with you; if they decline, keep trying, but don't push.
- Remind the person that with time and treatment, the depression will lift.

For more information, visit the National Institute for Mental Health website at <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>.

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