

DEPRESSION

Many adults and children, approximately 10 percent of the total population, suffer from a depressive illness. 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. Most people with a depressive illness do not seek treatment.

SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

- 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, feeling "slowed down"
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- Insomnia, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping
- Appetite and/or weight loss or overeating and weight gain
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Restlessness, irritability
- Headaches, pain, and digestive disorders that do not respond to treatment

CAUSES OF DEPRESSION

A serious loss, difficult relationship, financial problem, or any stressful change in life patterns can trigger a depressive episode. Very often, a combination of psychological and environmental factors is involved in the onset of a depressive disorder.

Depression in Women

Women experience depression about twice as often as men. Many hormonal factors may contribute to the increased rate of depression in women particularly such factors as menstrual cycle changes, pregnancy, miscarriage, postpartum period, pre-menopause, and menopause. Many women also face additional stresses such as responsibilities both at work and home, single parenthood, and caring for children and for aging parents.

Many women are also particularly vulnerable after the birth of a baby. The hormonal and physical changes, as well as the added responsibility of a new life,

can be factors that lead to postpartum depression in some women. Treatment by a physician and the family's emotional support for the new mother is the prime consideration in aiding her to recover her physical and mental well being and her ability to care for and enjoy the infant.



Depression in the Elderly

Some people have the mistaken idea that it is normal for the elderly to feel depressed. On the contrary, older people can feel satisfied with their lives. Sometimes, though, when depression develops, it may be dismissed as a normal part of aging. Depression in the elderly, undiagnosed and untreated causes needless suffering for the family and for the individual who could otherwise live a fruitful life. When he or she does go to the doctor, the symptoms described are usually physical, for the older person is often reluctant to discuss feelings of hopelessness, sadness, loss of interest in normally pleasurable activities, or extremely prolonged grief after a loss.

Depression in Children

The depressed child may pretend to be sick, refuse to go to school, or worry that the parent may die. Older children may sulk, get into trouble at school, be negative, and feel misunderstood. Because normal behaviors vary from one childhood stage to another, it can be difficult to tell whether a child is just going through a temporary "phase" or is suffering from depression.

DIAGNOSTIC EVALUATION AND TREATMENT

The first step to getting appropriate treatment for depression is a physical examination by a physician. Certain medications as well as some medical conditions such as a viral infection can cause the same symptoms as depression, and the physician should rule out these possibilities through examination, interview, and lab tests. If a physical cause for the depression is ruled out, a psychological evaluation should be done, by the physician or by referral to a psychiatrist or psychologist.

HOW TO HELP YOURSELF IF YOU ARE DEPRESSED

- **Set realistic goals** in light of the depression and assume a reasonable amount of responsibility.
- 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 religious, social, or other activities may help.
- **Expect your mood to improve gradually, not immediately.** Feeling better takes time.
- **It is advisable to postpone important decisions until the depression has lifted.** Before deciding to make a significant transition like job change, get married or divorced discuss it with others who know you well and have a more objective view of your situation.
- **Let your family and friends help you.**

HOW FAMILY AND FRIENDS CAN HELP

On occasion, it may require making an appointment and accompanying the depressed person to the doctor. It may also mean monitoring whether the depressed person is taking medication. This involves understanding,

patience, affection, and encouragement. Engage the depressed person in conversation and listen carefully. Do not disparage feelings expressed, but point out realities and offer hope. Do not ignore remarks about suicide. Report them to the depressed person's therapist. Invite the depressed person for walks, outings, to the movies, and other activities. Be gently insistent if your invitation is refused. Encourage participation in some activities that once gave pleasure, such as hobbies, sports, religious or cultural activities, but **do not push the depressed person to undertake too much too soon**. The depressed person needs diversion and company, but **too many demands can increase feelings of failure**.

