



*Make Prevention a CHOICE*

## Understanding Depression

Everyone gets the blues now and then. Depression should not be confused with the temporary feelings of sadness as a reaction to disappointments. Nor should depression be confused with the intense grief brought about by the loss of a loved one. Sadness and grief are normal and temporary reactions to stress and emotionally painful experiences.

When these symptoms last for more than a couple weeks, the condition then may be clinical depression. In addition to feelings, depression can change behavior, physical health and appearance, academic performance, social activity and the ability to handle everyday decisions and pressures. Research from the National Institute of Mental Health has shown that in the United States one in ten adult's experiences depression each year and treatment can alleviate the symptoms in over eighty percent of the cases.

### **Symptoms of Depression:**

- Persistent sadness, 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 sexual drive
- Sleep disturbance: sleeping too little or sleeping too much in an irregular pattern.
- Poor appetite and weight loss or overeating and weight gain
- Loss of energy: excessive fatigue, feeling "slowed down"
- Thoughts of death, self harm, or suicide; suicide attempts
- Restlessness, irritability
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain

### **Causes of Depression:**

Some types of depression run in families, indicating that this can be biologically inherited. Sometimes generation after generation get depressed in some families or it can occur in people who have no family history of depression. Whether inherited or not, major depression is often associated with having too little or too much of certain brain biochemistry or a genetic link.

Psychological makeup also plays a role in becoming depressed. People who have low self-esteem, who consistently view themselves and the world with pessimism, or who are readily overwhelmed by stress, are prone to depression. A serious loss, chronic illness, difficult relationship, financial problem or any unwelcome change in life patterns can trigger a depressive episode. Very often, a combination of genetic, psychological, and environmental factors are involved in the onset of depression.

### **Diagnostic Evaluation and Treatment:**

Family physicians, psychiatrists, mental health clinics and managed care organizations are usually the best contact for evaluation and treatment. The first step to getting appropriate treatment is a complete physical and psychological evaluation to determine whether you have depression and the cause. Certain medications as well as some medical conditions can cause symptoms of depression and the examining physician should rule out these possibilities through examination, interview, and medical tests.

A good diagnostic evaluation also will include a complete history of your symptoms, i.e., when they started, how long they have lasted, how severe they are, whether you've had them before and, if so, whether you were treated and what treatment you received. Your doctor should ask you about alcohol and drug use, and if you have thought about death and suicide. Further, a history should include questions about whether other family members have had a depressive illness and if treated, what treatments they may have received and which were effective.

A variety of antidepressant medications and psychotherapies can be used as treatment. Some people do well with combined treatment: medication to gain relatively quick symptom relief and psychotherapy to learn more effective ways to deal with life problems. Most people can be successfully treated for depression on an outpatient basis.

It is important to realize the feelings of being worthless and helpless are part of the depression. They will fade as treatment begins to take effect. Be patient with yourself and don't give up.

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