

DEPRESSION

Over seventeen million Americans suffer from clinical depression at some point in their life. Depression causes great human suffering and often significantly disrupts the normal life functioning of individuals and those around them.

Depression is more than feeling “blue” or experiencing periods of grief after a loss. It is a psychiatric illness that affects the whole person (including feelings, thoughts, and behaviors), which can last for weeks, months, or even years. Depression not only disrupts eating and sleeping patterns in individuals, but also affects the way people feel about themselves and how they think about life events. *Depression is not a sign of personal weakness* and can often be treated successfully.

Depression varies in four ways: onset, frequency, intensity, and form.

- **ONSET:** For some individuals, depression may occur after a “trigger” or stressful events, while others may experience depression suddenly and without apparent reason.
- **FREQUENCY:** Some individuals experience one episode of depression, while others have recurrent episodes throughout their lifetime.
- **INTENSITY:** Some individuals have severe symptoms making normal daily functioning impossible. Other individuals have chronic symptoms that do not interfere with their everyday life functioning but affect their quality of life.
- **FORM:** Depression can also be a symptom of bipolar disorder, a type of depressive disorder, in which individuals experience cycles of extreme highs (i.e., mania) and extreme lows (i.e., depression) in their mood.

Symptoms of depression can include:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or “empty” mood
- Feelings of hopelessness and pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, helplessness, and worthlessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities that were once enjoyed, including sex
- Insomnia or hypersomnia (e.g., sleeping more than 10 hours a day)
- Eating disturbances (e.g., loss of appetite and weight or weight gain)
- Decreased energy and fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, and making decisions
- Excessive crying
- Restlessness or irritability
- Persistent aches and pains that do not respond to treatment
- Thoughts of death or suicide; suicide attempts

In the workplace, depression may be recognized by:

- Decreased productivity
- Morale problems
- Lack of cooperation
- Safety risks or accidents
- Absenteeism
- Frequent statements about being tired all the time
- Complaints of unexplained aches and pains
- Alcohol and drug abuse

An individual may be diagnosed with depression if she or he has five or more of the above-mentioned symptoms that persist for more than two weeks, or interfere with work or family life. The diagnosis should include a complete medical exam and a family history of health problems.

A person can access help with depression from the following people and organizations: (a) physicians; (b) mental health specialists; (c) employee assistance programs; (d) health maintenance organizations; (e) community mental health centers; (f) hospital departments of psychiatry or outpatient psychiatric clinics; (g) state hospital outpatient clinics; (h) family service agencies; (i) private clinics and facilities; and (j) support and self-help groups.

Sometimes depressed people have difficulty getting help because their illness saps them of energy and self-esteem and makes them feel worthless and helpless. Family and friends may need to encourage their depressed loved one to get help from a professional, and in some cases, they may need to take the person into treatment.

Once a diagnosis of depression is made, several treatment options may be pursued. If depression is moderate or severe in intensity and has persisted for several weeks or months, many psychiatrists will suggest that the person try an antidepressant medication. Several types of antidepressant medications are now available and a majority of the people treated shows a significant improvement of symptoms. In addition, many depressed individuals can benefit from psychotherapy (i.e., talk therapy) and are referred to therapists to deal with the psychological or interpersonal problems associated with their illness. Psychiatrists may also recommend a combination of medication and talk therapy. In cases where severe, chronic, and life-threatening symptoms have not responded to traditional treatments, electroconvulsive treatment (ECT)(i.e., electric shocks that stimulate the brain) may be considered. Because each individual responds differently to treatment, the individual's treatment plan should be reevaluated if relief from depressive symptoms is not seen after a few weeks.

With treatment, 80% of people suffering from depression can improve significantly, typically in a matter of weeks.