



Depression

What is depression? Depression should be thought of as a medical problem. If you have feelings of sadness all or most of the time for a period that lasts at least several months, your doctor will probably say you are suffering from depression.

When depression occurs, treatment by your regular doctor or a mental health professional may be needed.

Many people may feel depressed, but it may not be bad enough or last long enough to be diagnosed as the illness of depression. Sometimes, feeling depressed is a normal reaction to getting bad news or being very stressed from dealing with sickness. Whether or not it can be considered a normal reaction, feeling very sad can cause suffering. If you feel troubled by this, it is best to get help.

It's important to be aware of the signs, causes, and treatments of depression. Knowing if you're depressed is the first step in getting the help you need in overcoming the problem.

Symptoms of Depression

People who are depressed may not have *all* of the following problems. Some will have many, others will have just a few. How strong the symptoms are may also be different for every person and usually change over time. Signs of depression can include:

- Always feeling sad
- Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness
- Feelings of worthlessness and guilt
- Tiredness or low energy

- Loss of interest or pleasure in everyday activities
- Not wanting to be around other people, including family and friends
- Sleep problems (trouble falling asleep or staying asleep or sleeping too much)
- Not wanting to eat, or overeating
- Crying a lot
- Problems paying attention, remembering, or making decisions
- Easily getting annoyed about things
- A feeling that life is not worth living
- Talking about or having thoughts of hurting yourself
- Drinking too much alcohol or abusing drugs

What Causes Depression?

Most people coping with chronic illness experience depressed mood from time to time. Only some of these people develop depression as a real illness, which can be a medical problem that can complicate other health issues. The tendency to develop depression can be inherited. Both depressed mood and a more serious depression can be set off by many different kinds of problems, such as:

- Losing the ability to function because of your illness
- Being in pain all or most of the time
- Changes to your appearance caused by the illness or treatment

- Sexual problems
- Side effects of medicines and other treatments
- Other symptoms of illness, like feeling tired or having trouble breathing
- Feeling that you're being a burden to your family and friends
- Being alone and isolated
- Feeling that your religious beliefs aren't helping anymore

Treatment for Depression

If you experience depressed mood that is troublesome or prevents you from functioning, tell your doctor. Your doctor may or may not diagnose depression, but he or she will offer a treatment plan. Some tests may be ordered to determine whether the problem is related to a change in the blood. Referral to a mental health professional—a psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker—may be suggested. Treatments include:

- Antidepressant medication
- Medications to treat a possible cause for the depressed mood
- Psychotherapy or counseling
- Medications for pain or other distressing symptoms
- Stress management, such as relaxation techniques or guided imagery

What Can You Do to Help?

When your mood is poor, you may not feel like eating or keeping a normal schedule. You should try to lessen the impact of the problem.

- Go to bed and get out of bed at your normal times.
- Eat meals, even if you are not hungry.
- Try to exercise, at least by walking every day, if you can.
- Spend time with other people and talk with family and friends.
- If you wish, reach out for support from clergy.
- Try to manage stress by using relaxation techniques or listening to music.
- If your doctor or therapist suggests a diary to write down your mood each day, use this method to share information.

Patient Education Series

Depression

When your symptoms are managed, you will:

- Enjoy activities and have more energy
- Enjoy family and friends
- Feel less stress and anxiety
- Get better sleep at night
- Have a better quality of life

This educational material is provided by the Palliative Care Project, a partnership between Community Care of Brooklyn and the MJHS Institute for Innovation in Palliative Care.