

## How to Recognize and Cope with Depression

Everyone occasionally feels blue or sad. But these feelings are usually short-lived and pass within a couple of days. When you have depression, it interferes with daily life and causes pain for both you and those who care about you. Major depressive disorder, or major depression, is characterized by a combination of symptoms that interfere with a person's ability to work, sleep, study, eat, and enjoy once-pleasurable activities. Major depression is disabling and prevents a person from functioning normally. Some people may experience only a single episode within their lifetime, but more often a person may have multiple episodes. Below are some frequently asked questions and answers about how to recognize and cope with depression.



### ◆ What are the signs and symptoms of depression?

People who have depression do not all experience the same symptoms. The severity, frequency, and duration of symptoms vary depending on the individual and his or her particular illness. However, some common signs and symptoms of depression include: persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" feelings; feelings of hopelessness or pessimism; feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness; irritability, restlessness; loss of interest in activities or hobbies once pleasurable, including sex; fatigue and decreased energy; difficulty concentrating, remembering details, and making decisions; insomnia, early-morning wakefulness, or excessive sleeping; overeating, or appetite loss; thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts; aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems that do not ease even with treatment.

### ◆ What causes depression?

Most likely, depression is caused by a combination of genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors. Some types of depression tend to run in families. However, depression can occur in people without family histories of depression too. Scientists are studying certain genes that may make some people more prone to depression. Some genetics research indicates that risk for depression results from the influence of several genes acting together with environmental or other factors. In addition, trauma, loss of a loved one, a difficult relationship, or any stressful situation may trigger a depressive episode. Other depressive episodes may occur with or without an obvious trigger.

### ◆ **How is depression diagnosed and treated?**

Depression, even the most severe cases, can be effectively treated. The earlier treatment can begin, the more effective it is. The first step to getting appropriate treatment is to visit a doctor or mental health specialist who can rule out the possibility of certain medications, and some medical conditions, such as viruses or a thyroid disorder, causing the depression symptoms. If the doctor can find no medical condition that may be causing the depression, the next step is a psychological evaluation. The doctor may refer you to a mental health professional, who should discuss with you any family history of depression or other mental disorder, and get a complete history of your symptoms. You should discuss when your symptoms started, how long they have lasted, how severe they are, and whether they have occurred before and if so, how they were treated. The mental health professional may also ask if you are using alcohol or drugs, and if you are thinking about death or suicide. Once diagnosed, a person with depression can be treated in several ways. The most common treatments are medication and psychotherapy.

### ◆ **What should I do if I have depression?**

If you have depression, you may feel exhausted, helpless, and hopeless and it may be extremely difficult to take any action to help yourself. However, it is important to recognize that these feelings are part of the depression and that treatment can help you feel better. Try to see a professional as soon as possible since research has shown that the longer one waits to be assessed, the greater the impairment can be down the road. Keep in mind that your mood will improve gradually, not immediately. Do not expect to suddenly “snap out of” your depression, but be patient with yourself as you are undergoing treatment and celebrate your goals as you reach them, no matter how small they may seem to you.

### ◆ **How can I take care of myself if I’m depressed?**

There are several things you can do to take care of yourself, both physically and emotionally if you are depressed. Engage in mild physical activity or exercise and/or participating in activities that you used to enjoy. If you are feeling overwhelmed by large projects, break them up into smaller tasks and just do what you can. Try to spend time with other people and confide in a trusted friend or relative. Also, try not to isolate yourself—allow others to help and support you. Postpone important decisions, such as getting married or divorced or changing jobs, until you feel better. Discuss decisions with others who know you well and have a more objective view of your situation. Set realistic goals for yourself and continue to educate yourself about healthy ways to manage depression.

### ◆ **Where can I go to get help for my depression?**

Several different mental health resources offer support services for individuals seeking help for depression. These include: mental health specialists (such as psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, or mental health counselors); health maintenance organizations; community mental health centers; hospital psychiatry departments and outpatient clinics; mental health programs at universities or medical schools; state hospital outpatient clinics; family services, social agencies, or clergy; peer support groups; private clinics and facilities; employee assistance programs; and local medical and/or psychiatric societies. You may contact any of these resources directly or ask your primary care doctor for a referral to a specialist or agency who can help you.

**If you are thinking about harming yourself, tell someone who can help immediately. Call 911 or go to a hospital emergency room to get immediate help, or ask a friend or family member to help you do these things. Call the toll-free, 24-hour hotline of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255); TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (4889) to talk to a trained counselor.**