

Depression

Depression is a mood disorder that affects your entire body, including your moods, thoughts, and behaviors. Depression is not a sad mood that passes, nor is it a sign of weakness. If left untreated, the symptoms may last for weeks, months, or years.

Signs and Symptoms of Depression

An individual who experiences five or more of the following symptoms may be depressed.

- low motivation level
- avoiding friends
- difficulty concentrating
- changes in eating patterns
- changes in sleeping patterns
- suicidal thoughts
- unpleasant, negative thoughts
- an inability to experience pleasure in daily activities
- feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness
- crying spells
- loss of energy
- lack of sexual desire

Causes of Depression

- a combination of biological, genetic, and physiological factors.
- Some episodes of depression can be situation-induced. (For example, loss of a loved one, loss of ones job, difficulty adjusting to college, parental conflict, and financial problems).
- Depression may be due to a chemical imbalance, physical illness, drug and alcohol use, or an inadequate diet.

Managing Depression

- set small attainable goals
- eat a balanced diet
- exercise regularly
- avoid sleeping during the day
- reduce the use of alcohol
- participate in activities that make you feel better
- stop the gloomy thoughts by
- making a list of your good points
- writing down good things when they happen
- listening to music you enjoy
- seek counseling

Interventions

Talking with a counselor is one of the best ways to deal with depression. Counseling will:

- help you explore what the depression may be about
- help you recognize stressors in your life and develop strategies to manage them
- help you become more effective at communicating your feelings and letting people know what you want from them.

What is depression?

A depressive illness is a “whole body” illness, involving your body, mood, thoughts, and behavior. It affects the way you eat and sleep, the way you feel about yourself and the way you think about things. A depressive illness is not a passing blue mood. It is not a sign of personal weakness or a condition that can be willed or wished away. A person with a depressive illness cannot merely “pull themselves together” and get better.

Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months, or years. However, appropriate treatment can help over 80% of those who suffer from depression.

Types of depression:

Depressive illness comes in different forms, just as many other illnesses.

- *Major depression* is manifested by a combination of symptoms that interfere with the ability to work, sleep, eat and enjoy once pleasurable activities. These disabling episodes of depression can occur once, twice or several times in a lifetime.
- *Dysthymia*, a less severe type of depression, involves long-term, chronic symptoms that do not disable, but keep you from functioning at “full steam” or from feeling good. Sometimes people with dysthymia also experience major depressive episodes.
- *Manic-depressive* or bipolar is not nearly as prevalent as other forms of depressive illnesses. It involves cycles of depression and elation or mania. Sometimes the mood switches are dramatic and rapid, but most often they are gradual. When in the depressed cycle, one can have any or all other the symptoms of a depressive illness. When in the manic cycle, any or all symptoms listed under mania may be experienced. Mania often affects thinking, judgment, and social behavior in ways that may cause serious problems and embarrassment.

Symptoms of depression:

Not everyone who is depressed or manic experience every symptom. Some may experience a few symptoms, some many. Also, the severity of symptoms may vary with individuals.

Depression:

- persistent sad, anxious or empty mood
- feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
- feeling of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that you once enjoyed, including sex
- insomnia, early-morning awakening or oversleeping
- appetite and or weight loss or overeating and weight gain
- decreased energy, fatigue, being slowed down
- thoughts of death or suicide, suicide attempts
- restlessness, irritability
- difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions

persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders and chronic pain

Mania:

- inappropriate elation
- inappropriate irritability
- severe insomnia
- grandiose notions
- increased talking
- disconnected and racing thoughts
- increased sexual desire
- markedly increased energy
- poor judgment
- inappropriate social behavior

Causes of depression:

- There is a risk for developing depression when there is a family history, indicating a genetic link.
- Apparently additional factors, possibly a stressful environment and other psycho-social factors are involved in the onset of depression. A serious loss, chronic illness, difficult relationship, financial problem or any unwelcome change in life patterns can also trigger a depressive episode.

Treatment:

A variety of antidepressant medications and psycho-therapies can be used to treat depressive illnesses.

What can I do to help myself?

Depressive illnesses may make you feel exhausted, worthless, helpless, and hopeless. Such negative thoughts and feelings make some people feel like giving up. It is important to realize that these negative views are part of the depression and typically do not accurately reflect your situation. Negative thinking fades as treatment begins to take effect. In the meantime:

- Do not set yourself difficult goals or take on a great deal 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; this is usually better than being alone
- Participate in activities that may make you feel better. You might try mild exercise, going to a movie, a ball game or participating in religious or social activities. Don't overdo it or get upset if your mood is not greatly improved right away. Feeling better takes time.
- Do not make major life decisions, such as changing jobs or getting married or divorced, without consulting others who know you well and who have a more objective view of your situation. In any case, it is advisable to postpone important decisions until your depression has lifted.
- Do not expect to "snap" out of your depression. People rarely do. Help yourself as much as you can and don't blame yourself for not being up to par.
- Remember, do not accept your negative thinking. It is part of the depression and will disappear as your depression responds to treatment.

Family and friends:

- The most important thing anyone can do for the depressed person is to help him/her get appropriate diagnosis and treatment. This may involve encouraging the individual to stay with treatment until symptoms improve or to seek different treatment if not improvement occurs.
- The second most important thing is to offer emotional support. This involves understanding, patience, affection and encouragement. Engage the depressed person in conversation and listen carefully. Do not ignore remarks about suicide. Always report them to the doctor.
- 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.
- Do not accuse the depressed person of faking illness or of laziness or expect him/her to “snap out” of it. Eventually with treatment most depressed people do get better. Keep that in mind, and keep reassuring the depressed person that with time and help (s)he will feel better.

Getting Help

If you are concerned about someone that is presenting these symptoms or behaviors, one should be aware that there are many facilities and a variety of counselors to help individuals deal with depression. If you are a University of Louisiana at Lafayette student and are concerned and would like to speak to a counselor, please contact the Counseling and Testing center at 482-6480 for more information. The center offers unlimited confidential sessions free of charge to all students and university faculty/staff members.