

What is depression?

Depression (also known as major depression, major depressive disorder, sadness, the blues, or clinical depression) is a serious mental health disorder. Its symptoms affect how a person feels, thinks, and handles typical daily activities like sleeping, eating, interacting with family and friends, and employment. There are several types of depression:

- Major Depression includes symptoms of depressed mood or loss of interest, most of the time for 2 weeks or more, and interferes with daily activities.
- Persistent Depressive Disorder (also called Dysthymia or Dysthymic Disorder) consists of less severe symptoms that last much longer, usually for at least 2 years.
- Perinatal Depression is a type of depression that occurs during pregnancy or after childbirth. The symptoms that begin during pregnancy are prenatal depression, and depression after the baby is born is Postpartum Depression.
- Seasonal Affective Disorder is depression that comes and goes with the seasons, with symptoms typically starting in the late fall/early winter and going away during the spring and summer.

Individuals with Bipolar Disorder (also known as Manic Depression or Manic-Depressive Illness) also experience depressive episodes, when they feel sad, indifferent, or hopeless and have very low activity levels. However, they also have episodes of unusually elevated moods. They might feel extremely happy, irritable, or “up” with a marked increase in activity level.

Who gets Depression?

Depression affects individuals of all ages, races, ethnicities, and genders. Women are diagnosed with depression more than men, but that does not mean men can't be depressed. Most men may be less likely to recognize, talk about it, and seek help. They are at greater risk of their depression being underdiagnosed and treated. There are also higher rates of depressive disorders among members of the LGBTQ+ community.

What are the symptoms of depression:

You may have depression, if you have been experiencing some of the following signs and symptoms, most of the day, nearly every day, for a minimum of 2 weeks:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or “empty” mood
- Feelings of hopelessness or pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness

- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities
- Fatigue, lack of energy, or feeling slowed down
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Difficulty sleeping, waking too early in the morning, or oversleeping
- Changes in appetite or unplanned weight changes
- Physical aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems without a clear physical cause, which do not go away with treatment.
- Thoughts of death or suicide or suicide attempts.

Not all depressed individuals experience every one of these symptoms. Some only experience a few of the symptoms, and others many. A symptom associated with a depressive disorder is when it interferes with daily functioning and causes the individual distress.

There also can be changes in an individual's mood or behavior, which could include the following:

- Increased anger or irritability
- Feelings restless or on edge
- Become withdrawn, negative, or detached
- Greater impulsivity
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Isolating from family and friends
- Inability to meet the responsibilities of work and family or ignoring other important roles
- Problems with sexual desire and performance

Individuals of both genders can feel depressed, how they express those symptoms and the ways they cope with them may differ. Men and women may seem angry or irritable. Also, an increase in the use of alcohol and drugs can be a sign of depression in anyone. However, men are more likely to use these substances to cope.

What are the risk factors for depression?

Research suggests that there are genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors that play a role in depression:

- Personal or family history of depression
- Major negative life changes, trauma, or stress

Depression can start at any age, but it often begins in adulthood. However, it is becoming more recognized in children and adolescents. Children are more likely to express depression as irritability or anxiety rather than sadness.

Depression, in those in midlife or older, is often seen with other serious medical illnesses, such as diabetes, cancer, heart disease, chronic pain, and Parkinson's Disease. These illnesses are often worse when depression is present. Some research has shown that those with depression and other medical issues tend to have more severe symptoms of these disorders.

Some physical health problems, like thyroid disease, or medication side effects can contribute to depression.

How is depression treated?

Depression is usually treated with psychotherapy, medication, or a combination of the two. There are several types of psychotherapy (also known as talk therapy or counseling) which are very effective treatment options. Therapy teaches individuals new ways of thinking and behaving and promotes changes in habits that contribute to depression. An example of an evidence-based approach to treating depression is cognitive-behavioral therapy and interpersonal therapy.

Another form of treatment is antidepressants. These medications work by changing how the brain produces or uses certain chemicals that are involved in the regulation of mood and stress. Antidepressants usually take 4-8 weeks to work. It is important to give medications a chance to work before deciding if this treatment is right for you.

How to find help for depression.

Your primary care provider is a good place to start. They will be able to provide you with referrals to qualified mental health providers, like psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists, or clinical social workers. You can also learn more about getting help at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), or the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) website.

Once in treatment, here are some other things you can do that help you feel better:

- Become physically active. Just 30 minutes a day of walking can boost your mood.
- Maintain a regular bedtime and wake-up time.
- Eat regular, healthy meals
- Break up large tasks into small ones; do what you can as you can. Decide what must get done and what can wait.
- Connect with others and talk about your feelings with those you trust.
- Delay making important decisions, such as getting married or divorced, or changing jobs until you feel better. Discuss these decisions with those you trust.
- Avoid using alcohol, nicotine, or drugs.