

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

Information on Depression

The National Mental Health Association developed this factsheet as an introductory overview of depression. Please feel free to photocopy it and share it with others.

INFORMATION: THE KEY INGREDIENT FOR TREATING DEPRESSION

Depression is a word commonly used to describe temporarily "down" moods or sad feelings, but for a lot of people—at least 10 million in the U.S. alone—it means something much more serious.

For these individuals and those that care about them, depression is a severe illness, affecting their body, feelings and the way they live their lives. In some cases, it can cause death by suicide.

It's not an illness they choose, or one they could escape if he or she would "snap out of it," anymore than one decides to have diabetes or heart disease.

Fortunately, effective treatment (through medication, psychotherapy or combination of both) is available for more than 80 percent of those with this illness, enabling them to live full, healthy lives. The most important part of treatment for any disorder is *information*—accurate, current facts on the causes, symptoms, treatment options and tips for coping. The patient, family and friends should all have this basic understanding of depression to ensure the fullest, quickest recovery.

MORE THAN A CASE OF THE BLUES

It's important to distinguish between normal feelings of sadness we all occasionally experience and what mental health professionals refer to as *clinical depression*.

Clinical depression refers to several serious conditions that are not related to occasional periods of dejection or even the intense feelings of grief that life brings to everybody at one time or another.

Depression takes many different forms, each of which varies from person to person. In general, though, clinical depression is referred to as either "major depression" (the "sad" kind), or "manic-depression" (the "up-and-down" kind).

WHAT CAUSES CLINICAL DEPRESSION?

Not everyone agrees on what specifically causes these conditions (also known as depressive disorders), but scientists *do* know that they're not caused by personal weakness, bad parenting or other factors falsely attributed them.

In fact, leading theories indicate that the causes are mostly *biological* in nature, as with cancer, diabetes and other major illnesses.

Biological factors that are believed to contribute to the development of depressive disorders include heredity (some people may have a gene or genes that predisposes them to a depressive disorder) and chemical imbalances (some people's brains may not have the appropriate balance of chemicals needed to process behavioral information).

It's believed that in some cases, a stressful situation can bring these inherited traits and/or chemical imbalances to the forefront and change a person's behavior in much the same way stress is known to play a role in the heart disease or other medical problems.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF CLINICAL DEPRESSION?

As with any other illness, clinical depression has recognizable symptoms. These vary from person to person, and not all people with depression have all the symptoms. In general, though, this list of symptoms gives a pretty clear idea as to whether you or someone you know has clinical "major" depression:

- persistent (more than several weeks) sad, anxious or "empty" mood
- feelings of hopelessness or pessimism
- loss of pleasure or interest in ordinary activities, such as sex
- problems with sleep (insomnia, early-morning waking or oversleeping)
- eating disturbances (loss of appetite or overeating)
- decreased energy; fatigue
- restlessness; irritability
- difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- inappropriate feelings of guilt
- thoughts of death or suicide (*these should always be taken seriously*)



Occasionally, the symptoms of depression masquerade as persistent physical ailments, such as headaches, digestive problems or chronic pain. If your family doctor can't find a specific health problem that might be causing these ailments, consider seeing a mental health professional for an evaluation.

Other people have a depressive disorder that involves something called *mania*, giving rise to the name "manic-depressive" illness. Because clinical depression is often associated only with feelings of sadness or listlessness, symptoms of manic-depressive illness can go unrecognized. These symptoms include:

- inappropriate elation
- insomnia
- unrealistic notions or self-attitudes
- dramatically increased talking, fidgeting or sexual activity
- racing thoughts
- inability to make decisions
- inappropriate social behaviors

You, a friend or someone in your family may have clinical depression and not even realize it. Sometimes, the very nature of the disorder can interfere with the ability to get help. Help is available. If you or someone you know shows the symptoms listed on this factsheet, consider getting help from a mental health professional.

For information on the resources available in your community, call (408) 294-4991
Mental Health Association
In Santa Clara County

Contact these organizations for additional information:

National Mental Health Association
1021 Prince St., Alexandria, VA 22314
(800) 969-NMHA • (703) 684-7722

National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association
730 North Franklin, Ste. 501
Chicago, IL 60610
(312) 642-0049

National Foundation For Depressive Illness
P.O. Box 2257
New York, NY 10116-2257

National Alliance For The Mentally Ill
2101 Wilson Blvd., Ste. 302
Arlington, VA 22201
(703) 524-7600

Depression/Awareness, Recognition And Treatment Program
National Institute of Mental Health
5600 Fishers Ln., Rm. 14C-02
Rockville, MD 20857
(301) 443-4140