

Depression – How To cope With It!

What is depression?

Most of us feel sad or miserable quite often. This may follow a disappointment, loss of a friend, loss of a job, or a variety of other stressful events or unpleasant incidents. But at other times there seems to be no particular reason for sadness. Of course, if we search hard enough we can always find some stress in our lives to blame for our unpleasant feelings – the children, family finances, a spouse who could show more affection etc.

There is a tendency to label all our unpleasant ‘feelings’ as depression. Often they could be described more accurately, as anger, frustration, jealousy or fear.

The disorder that is given the somewhat confusing name ‘depression’ is an exaggeration of these everyday feelings of sadness. In its more severe forms the misery that is experienced is quite out of proportion to the stress that a person has been subjected to recently. The disorder is disabling and affects many areas of a person’s life in the family and community. The features of a depressive disorder include:

1. **Feeling miserable:** this dejection is present for much of the day, but may vary in its intensity. It lasts at least a week or two. A person looks sad and dejected.
2. **Loss of interest** or pleasure in the usual activities.
3. **Loss of appetite.**
4. **Loss of sexual drive.**
5. **Loss of sleep** despite feeling exhausted. Restless, unsatisfying sleep, with early waking.
6. **Persistent worrying** about trivial things.
7. **Inefficient or slowed thinking** with poor concentration, leading to difficulties sorting problems, making constructive plans or decisions.
8. **Recurring unpleasant thoughts**, particularly about being guilty, being a bad or unworthy person, or wishing to die.
9. **Slowed activity and speech.**
10. **Fearfulness** about people, places and things are exaggerated, often leading to withdrawal from a wide range of everyday activities and friends.
11. **Hearing a voice** (when nobody is about) that makes unpleasant remarks to you.

Any of these features may serve as a warning signal of approaching depression, but many occur in disorders other than depression. If you have experienced 4 or more of these features on a daily basis for at least two weeks it is very likely that you have a depressive disorder. Almost all persons suffering from depression feel very unhappy, but occasionally this feature may be less prominent. In such cases your fatigue, loss of appetite and fears may lead you to conclude that you are suffering from a physical disorder.

What causes depression?

Like most illnesses, the exact cause of depression is not known. There are many different theories, but no clear answers. Among the most commonly considered theories are:

Brain and Body Chemistry – Changes in the proportions of certain chemicals in the brain and body systems that seem to play a major part in controlling our emotions are found in persons who are depressed. It is thought that noradrenaline the hormone that plays a major role in controlling activation throughout the brain and body seems to be depleted. In women, the hormone changes associated with childbirth and the menopause increase the risk of depression.

Exaggeration of Mood Swings – We all tend to go up and down in our moods for no apparent reason. Some people seem to have more exaggerated 'highs' and 'lows' and are more prone to depression.

Life Stress – Death of a loved one, loss of a job, moving house, or other major stresses have been considered a factor in causing depression. It is not uncommon for the reaction to life stresses to be delayed, occurring several months after the event has occurred.

How common is depression?

Depression is extremely common. Surveys show that 20 – 30% of the population may suffer this disorder in the course of a year. Most cases are mild, but about one in twenty will experience a moderate or severe episode.

How is depression treated?

Medical treatment – There are drugs available that counter many of the symptoms of depression. Most people, although not all, will experience some relief from their depression from antidepressant drugs. However, often a combination of drugs and psychological help is required.

Psychological treatment – Talking with a professional psychotherapist, counsellor or other appropriately trained professional. There are many forms of 'talking treatment', but basically they all try to help sufferers by talking with them and relating to them in a special way so that they can understand themselves better. They help the person understand what their life stresses are or have been and how these stresses have impacted on their relationships, capacity to work and given rise to their depressive illness.

Whether depression causes imbalances in body chemistry or is caused by those imbalances, it is important to not simply address the symptoms, but to try and address the causes of depression and find ways of effectively coping with the stresses of life that so often stand behind the experience of depression. Depression doesn't just happen to a person. There are causes and ways of addressing those causes. Both medicine and psychotherapy are dedicated to helping people with depression address both the symptoms and the causes.