

Depression: An Overview

Whether you know it or not, you have firsthand knowledge of depression. You may work with someone that is depressed, have a friend or family member that is depressed, or you may be depressed yourself. How can I be so sure? Let's look at the facts.

Right now, there are more than 25 million depressed people living in the United States. There is a depressed person in one of every five American homes. Major depression (the more serious category of depressive illness) will probably affect 40 million Americans at least once in their lifetime.

If you are a woman or older than the age of 40, you are more likely to report that you are depressed. If you are a depressed male, there is a good chance that you will suffer in silence. This is why the statistics on depression probably underestimate the number of people who are suffering. In addition, more people are now developing depression at a younger age. For the baby-boomer generation (those born after 1940), the number of people that were depressed by the age of 25 is in the tens of millions!

Depression is a very costly affliction in both economic and human terms. Every year businesses in this country lose 15 to 35 billion dollars due to depression. This includes medical treatment, missed workdays, decreased productivity, and increased worker turnover. While businesses lose huge sums of money, people probably lose more, especially if their depression continues untreated. Depression leads to substance abuse, destroys careers and relationships, and wrecks a person's self-esteem.

As mentioned above, the depression statistics are almost certainly under-estimates. This is because many cases of depression are unreported or misdiagnosed. It has been estimated that as many as two-thirds of people who have depression fail to seek treatment. The symptoms of the condition itself often prevent a person from finding help. Difficulty making decisions, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, self loathing, and extreme fatigue are all symptoms of depression that can interfere with a person's motivation to seek treatment.

Another reason that many people do not seek treatment is because depressive illness is misunderstood. These people experience their depression as a sign of weakness. They expect that they should be able to "snap out of it" themselves. In a substantial number of cases these feelings of self-reproach are reinforced by the attitudes of family members or close friends. The truth is that depression is no more a personal failure than cancer, diabetes,

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or any other medical condition. You cannot "snap out of it" at will. In fact, without proper treatment, depression can last for many months, or even years.

The bad news is that the longer the illness goes undiagnosed and untreated, the more difficult it is to treat. Serious, untreated depression can result in suicide. People whose depression has developed to the extent that they require hospitalization, have a suicide rate of approximately 15 to 20 percent.

The good news is that with new discoveries and treatment techniques, depression is a highly treatable illness. With proper care administered by trained professionals, the symptoms of depression can be reduced or cured for 80 percent of patients treated.

What is Depression?

Depression is a type of mental disorder that affects a person's mood. Normal feelings fall along a continuum from mild to intense, and the same is true of depression. It is normal to respond to losses in one's life with sadness and gloom. But when these feelings block a person from performing their everyday activities or are out of line with the reality of a person's life, they are considered symptoms of a depressive disorder.

Depression is a term that is often used to describe periods of intense sadness. Everyone experiences down times. However, when you experience an overwhelming and long-lasting feeling of debilitating sadness that interferes with your everyday ability to function, you are said to have a condition known as major depression. People who are sad or "have the blues" due to the loss of a loved one, a job, or even a fight with a girlfriend or a boyfriend may have difficulty functioning for a short period of time. But these people are usually able to continue their activities without professional assistance. They can live their everyday lives despite their sadness. However, when these symptoms do not readily fade and continue to block you from thinking and acting in a functional manner, you are depressed and usually need to undergo professional treatment to resume your normal lifestyle.

What Causes Depression?

Experts are still not sure about the causes of depression. This is because they are complicated and not completely understood. In the past, doctors believed that depression was the result of thoughts or emotions that were troubling for a person. More recently, experts realize that there can be several factors working together that will lead a person to become depressed. The three most important of these are biological, genetic, and environmental factors.

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Biological causes are due to changes in the chemistry of the brain, such as fluctuations in the levels of important hormones. Genetic causes are the result of what you inherit from your parents. If one or both of your parents have a vulnerability to depression, then it can be transmitted to you. Environmental factors (also called emotional factors) result from stressful emotional situations, such as a lack of loving parents or the death of a parent during childhood. To make it even more complicated, depression can also occur as a result of a combination of the three factors just mentioned. If you inherited a vulnerability to depression from one of your parents, your brain may react to a stressful event in a way that causes you to get depressed.

Depression can also develop due to a physical illness, a reaction to a medication that you are taking, or as an outcome of substance abuse. In these cases, when the cause is successfully treated, the depression will end.

Different Types of Depression

Major depression

Jim cannot believe the change in his personality. Ever since he lost his job and started another lower paying one, he has not been the same person. He finds himself walking around without energy to do any of the things that he used to enjoy. Previously a hearty eater who may have been a few pounds overweight, food now has no meaning for him and he has seen his pants size diminish two sizes. His wife has also noticed the change. He no longer has any interest in sex, she has to goad him to pay attention to the kids, and he never has the energy to socialize with their friends. He spends most of his weekends sleeping now. Jim is finding it harder and harder to get up for work and his superiors have warned him about his absentee rate. Jim often finds himself questioning the reason for going on. He believes that if it were not for his family he would seriously consider ending it all.

Jim is suffering from the more serious form of depression known as major depression. Major depression is also known as clinical depression, unipolar depression, and major depressive disorder. People who experience major depression feel persistently sad. They do not take pleasure in activities that were once enjoyable. Other physical and mental problems often experienced include sleep problems, loss of appetite, inability to concentrate, memory problems, and aches and pains. People who suffer from this condition often feel worthless, helpless, and hopeless about their ability to fix things. They often welcome sleep and experience their waking life as a living nightmare. No matter how hard they try to snap out of it, they feel as though they are falling into an abyss with nothing to hold on to.

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Major depression usually strikes people between the ages of 25 and 44, although it can affect any person at any age. For most people, episodes of major depression last from six to nine months. Sometimes, even if major depression goes untreated, it will run its course and leave by itself. Doctors are not sure why this happens, but it is often attributed to the body's tendency to correct abnormal situations.

Dysthymia (minor depression)

Jill is now 42 years old and she reports never really feeling happy. She says that there were times when she felt that her life was going better than other times, but she never really remembers getting any joy out of her life. Jill reports that she is always negative about anything new that is suggested to her by others. She never really felt that any man was right for her and, as a result, Jill has been single all of her life. It is hard for her to laugh and Jill says that she's never had a sense of humor. She sighs often and always has the feeling that she is carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. She also has a chronic problem with her weight. Jill is forever on a diet, but her weight has always gone up and down like a yo-yo. She reports the need to sleep a great deal, but at times she has insomnia and walks around feeling tired all day. Jill blames this on her chronic low level of energy. She has always agonized over what for others would be simple decisions. Jill states that she hates her indecisiveness. Other people are always accusing her of spending half her day disagreeing with herself. As far back as junior high school, her guidance counselor told her that she needed to work on her low self-esteem. Jill feels that at her age, it is too late to change and she has accepted that she will always be unhappy and unfulfilled.

Jill is suffering from the milder, but longer lasting form of depression known as dysthymia. Dysthymia is also known as minor depression and is characterized by its long-lasting quality. People often suffer from this condition all of their lives. Dysthymia is typically diagnosed in people who have been experiencing its symptoms almost all day every day for two years with no greater than a two month span without the symptoms. In children and adolescents, the primary symptom is different from that of adults. Adults primarily have sadness, whereas children and adolescents often display irritability and defiance. Children also tend to do worse in school during times of depression. Besides feeling depressed, two of the following symptoms must be present for dysthymia to be diagnosed: poor appetite or overeating, problems sleeping or oversleeping, low energy, low self-esteem, poor concentration, difficulty making decisions, and feelings of hopelessness.

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Dysthymia affects two to three women for every man, and is thought to begin in childhood and adolescence. Left untreated, dysthymia will usually continue through a person's life. People who have dysthymia often have other disorders such as a phobia, anxiety disorder, or a personality disorder.

Bipolar depression

Joseph is feeling on top of the world. He has just come off a period where it was so difficult for him to do anything that he wanted to do. In fact, for a few months, he didn't do anything. He just stayed in the house, most of the time sleeping. It is certainly different now. In fact, Joseph is almost always out of the house. He only needs two to three hours sleep a night and he feels that he has the energy of a bull. Joseph is spending most of his time on a new project. He is working on a new business venture that he knows is going to make him a fortune. Somewhere in the back of his mind he remembers that he has tried to start new businesses on numerous occasions and they have always resulted in financial disaster. However, those failures are in the back of Joseph's mind now because he knows that this idea is a sure winner. He is spending most of his days trying to convince banks to lend him the money. He cannot understand why the banks that he has visited so far seem so negative, but Joseph is sure that he will find a bank soon that will advance him the large sum of money that he needs. He has spared no expense in this effort. Joseph has gone to the best stores and purchased a new wardrobe. He has ordered the latest in computer equipment. He also has hired a commercial realtor to find him modern offices. Joseph has not told his family about his new idea because they always rain on his parade. They are negative about all of his ideas. But he knows that they do not have the vision that he has and that they will eat their words when they see the millions that he is going to make with his new venture.

Joseph is suffering from a condition called bipolar depression. Bipolar depression is also called bipolar disorder, manic-depression, and manic-depressive illness. When a person has bipolar disorder, his moods shift between two extremes. For a period of time the person experiences the symptoms of depression (the depressive phase), then his mood will shift into a period of mania (euphoria). In between these extremes, there may be a period of normal functioning. Mania is characterized by extreme elation and self-importance. During a manic phase a person will feel extreme irritability for people and occurrences that are felt to stand in his way. Energy, joy, and self-esteem are raised to irrational levels and a delusional pattern often follows.

Two to three million people suffer from bipolar depression. It usually begins during adolescence or early adulthood. Substance abuse and other mental illnesses are common in people with this disorder. In some people, bipolar disorder will follow a long course of major

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depression. On average, people diagnosed with bipolar disorder will experience roughly four episodes of mania or depression the ailment over the course of their lifetime.

Atypical depression

Gillian remembers that her first bout of depression occurred in early adolescence. She states that her childhood was relatively normal and uneventful. It was marked only by her mother acting in ways that she now understands are symptoms of depression. Gillian is now 48 and she states that she has been depressed since she was 13. She states that her feeling of depression will get better for a period and then worsen again. When they do get better, she is able to enjoy the pleasures of life. During the up times she will enjoy speaking to people, going out with her husband, and eating. She states that she especially enjoys going to good restaurants, where she will frequently overeat. Gillian states that one of her worst traits is being late for appointments due to oversleeping. When her depression worsens, Gillian will experience a general lack of energy, show little or no initiative, and be overly sensitive to rejection by others. Gillian also reports that she is prone to panic attacks. These attacks first occurred in early adolescence and they continue to this day. She states that her level of anxiety has increased as she has gotten older.

Gillian is suffering from an atypical depression. This type of depression is very common in women. The symptoms of oversleeping, overeating, hypersensitivity to rejection (especially romantic rejection), and intermittent panic attacks, are characteristic of atypical depression. This type of depression usually begins in adolescence and, if untreated, will often continue throughout life.

Less Common Depressive Disorders

Psychotic depression

Approximately 15 percent of people who suffer from major depression also show symptoms of psychotic depression. These symptoms include hearing voices inside one's head (auditory hallucinations), having visions of people or things that are not actually there (visual hallucinations), and delusional thinking. People who suffer from this extreme form of major depression are in need of immediate attention. Because they cannot rationally judge the consequences of their actions, they are in serious danger of killing themselves.

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Postpartum depression

Postpartum depression is thought to be a form of major depression. This is due to the similarity of symptoms in the two conditions. About 10 percent of new mothers develop postpartum depression. It is most common in women who have already experienced some form of depressive illness. Most women suffer from a down feeling the first few days after giving birth. However, those with postpartum depression experience symptoms that are more prolonged, severe, and disabling. If not treated, postpartum depression can last for months or years.

Premenstrual dysphoric disorder

This condition is experienced by approximately four percent of menstruating women. Different from premenstrual syndrome (PMS), women who suffer from premenstrual dysphoric disorder have more severe symptoms of deep depression or irritability for a week or two prior to or during menstruation.

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)

As its name indicates, people who suffer from SAD experience symptoms of depression at certain times during the year. Typically this condition will start in the late fall and continue until the early spring. People who live in a geographical area that is frequently cloudy, have vision problems, or work in a dark place are more prone to experience the symptoms of SAD. These people will have low energy during the fall and the winter or at the time of onset. Other symptoms of this condition are an increase in appetite and cravings for carbohydrates. These people can gain as much as 20 pounds before their symptoms subside. For children, problems with irritability, a sudden decline in school performance, and difficulty awakening in the morning may indicate the presence of SAD.

Conclusion

Depression is an extremely common and potentially devastating condition. Its economic and personal costs are enormous in scope. For those affected, it is important to remember that depression is a medical condition just like diabetes or cancer. And just as for all medical conditions, it is important for a doctor to know what form of depression you have before deciding on a treatment strategy.

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