Depression: Facts and Finding Help and Support—Types, symptoms, and causes of depression

Depression is a common and serious mental health disorder that can interfere with our ability to work, relate to others, engage in activities, and enjoy life. Fortunately, most people with depression can be helped with treatment.

This is the first in a three-part series of articles on depression.

Types, symptoms, and causes of depression

Everyone occasionally feels sad or blue, but these feelings are usually short-lived and pass within a couple of days. However, when a person is experiencing depression, the condition interferes with daily life and normal functioning. Depression is a serious mental disorder, and most people who have it need treatment to get better. About 1 in 10 North Americans have suffered from depression at some point in their lives, according to research by the National Institute of Mental Health and the Canadian Community Health Survey. Globally, depression affects more than 300 million people of all ages, the World Health Organization says, and fewer than half of them receive treatment for it.

There are several types of depression, which doctors call depressive disorders. The two most common types are major depression and persistent depressive disorder:

**Major depression** is characterized by a combination of symptoms that interfere with the ability to work, sleep, eat, and enjoy life. An episode of major depression may occur only once or twice, but more often, a person has several episodes.

**Persistent depressive disorder** involves chronic symptoms that last for two years or more. The symptoms are not disabling, but they keep a person from functioning at “full steam” or from feeling good. Sometimes people with persistent depressive disorder also experience major depressive episodes.
Some forms of depression have slightly different characteristics than these two common types or may develop under other circumstances:

**Psychotic depression** occurs when severe depression is accompanied by a form of psychosis, such as delusions, hallucinations, or a break with reality.

**Postpartum depression** is diagnosed when a new mother has a major depressive episode within one month of giving birth.

**Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)** involves depression during the winter months, when there is less sunlight. It generally eases in the spring and summer.

**Bipolar disorder**, also known as manic-depressive illness, causes severe mood swings—from extreme highs (mania) to extreme lows (depression).

**Symptoms of depression**

People who are depressed may not have all symptoms of the condition. Some people experience a few symptoms, and some have many. The frequency and severity of symptoms may vary from one person to the next.

Symptoms of depression include the following:

- persistent sad, anxious, or “empty” moods
- feelings of hopelessness or pessimism
- feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness
- loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and once-enjoyable activities, including sex
- sleeping difficulties, such as trouble falling asleep or staying asleep or excessive sleeping
- eating too much or too little
- fatigue, lack of energy, or feeling “slowed down”
- thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts
- restlessness or irritability
- difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain
Causes of depression

Depression has no single cause. It may result from a combination of genetic, biochemical, environmental, and psychological factors.

Depressive illnesses are disorders of the brain. Brain-imaging technologies, such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), have shown that the brains of people who have depression look different from those of people without depression. The parts of the brain involved in mood, thinking, sleep, appetite, and behavior appear different. But these images do not reveal why the depression has occurred and cannot be used to diagnose depression.

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Some types of depression tend to run in families. However, depression can occur in people with no family history of depression. Scientists are studying certain genes that may make some people more prone to depression. Some genetics research indicates that risk for depression results from the influence of several genes acting together with environmental or other factors.

Going through a painful experience—such as the death of close relative, the loss of a job, or serious difficulties in a relationship—may trigger a depressive episode. Certain types of chronic or severe illnesses can also cause or contribute to depression, either because of the effects of the condition itself or the medications used to treat it. These health concerns include stroke, cancer, AIDS, heart disease, and Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s disease. Some depressive episodes may occur without an obvious trigger.

This is the first in a three-part series of articles on depression. Read the next in the series, “Treatment options.”

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