Depression: Facts and Finding Help and Support—Treatment options

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 second in a three-part series of articles on depression. Read the previous article, “Types, symptoms, and causes of depression.”

Treatment options

Most people with depression—even those with severe disorders—can be helped with treatment. Effective treatment begins with visiting a doctor to rule out medical causes of the problem. If a doctor finds no disease or other medical condition that may be causing the depression, the next step is a psychological evaluation. The physician may refer you to a mental health professional, who will talk further with you about your symptoms.

Once you have a diagnosis, treatment can proceed in several ways. The most common types of treatment are medication and psychotherapy, or both.

Medication. A doctor may prescribe antidepressants or other medications that may be helpful. Many people have concerns about taking medication. Having a low level of neurotransmitters is one of several biological factors that can contribute to depression, and medication can help with it. Taking medication for depression is no different from someone with diabetes needing insulin or someone with high blood pressure taking medication to lower blood pressure. There is often a stigma around taking medication for depression. It is important to work with your doctor to determine the best medication for you and your specific needs. You may need to try a few medications in the beginning, all while working with your doctor until you find the one that works best for you.

Some people do best with medication and some with psychotherapy.
Other people need a combination of both.

**Psychotherapy, or “talk therapy.”** Psychotherapy is a form of treatment that can help a person solve life issues, reduce feelings of anxiety and depression, improve relationships and social skills, and even improve job performance. Research shows that psychotherapy is effective in treating most common mental health problems. For example, about 80 percent of people suffering from depression make significant progress with psychotherapy.

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Another form of treatment, such as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), may be recommended when depression is severe or life threatening or if a person can’t take antidepressants.

**Antidepressant medications**

Antidepressants work with natural brain chemicals known as neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, norepinephrine, or dopamine. Antidepressants include:

**Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs).** SSRIs affect a brain chemical called serotonin, and SNRIs affect two chemicals, serotonin and norepinephrine. SSRIs are often the first type of antidepressant that a doctor will recommend, in part because they often cause fewer side effects than other types.

**Atypical antidepressants.** Some antidepressants are called “atypical” because they work differently than SSRIs or SNRIs. One commonly prescribed atypical antidepressant is bupropion, which is used both to treat depression and to prevent depression in people with seasonal affective disorder. Other medications in this category include trazodone and mirtazapine.

**Tricyclics.** Tricyclics are an older group of antidepressants and are named for their chemical structure. They may be prescribed for people who can’t take SSRIs or SNRIs or for whom those medications don’t work well.
Monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs). MAOIs are the oldest class of antidepressants, and for some people they work better than other medications. But people who take them must avoid certain foods and drinks, such as cheese and red wine.

A doctor may need to try a variety of antidepressants and adjust the dosage to find one that works for you.

If an antidepressant is prescribed for you

Take these steps if an antidepressant is prescribed for you:

Ask about the side effects. Also find out about any testing that may need to be done to monitor the effects of the medication on your body.

Be patient. Finding the right medication can take time. Work closely with your doctor, and report any side effects and benefits that you experience.

Always talk with your doctor before you stop taking a medication, even if you feel better. Some medications must be stopped gradually to give your body time to adjust. If you have bipolar disorder or chronic major depression, you may need to take medication daily to avoid disabling symptoms.

If you are taking MAOIs, remember that you will have to avoid certain foods, including cheeses, wines, and pickles. Get a complete list of foods to avoid from your doctor and always carry the list with you.

Never mix medications—prescribed, over-the-counter, or borrowed—without talking with your doctor. If your dentist or any other medical professional prescribes a drug, tell them that you are taking antidepressants. Some drugs that are safe when taken alone can be dangerous if taken with other medications.

Avoid alcohol, including beer, wine, and hard liquor. Alcohol can make antidepressants less effective. Talk with your doctor about how to plan for situations in which alcohol may be served.

Call your doctor if you have a question about any drug or if you are having a
problem you believe is drug-related.

Antidepressants may also increase the risk of suicidal thoughts in children, adolescents, and young adults. People in all three groups need to be monitored closely by doctors if they take antidepressants, especially in the first weeks of treatment.

**Psychotherapy**

Several types of psychotherapy can help with depression, including:

**Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).** This is a form of short-term therapy that has been found to help with some types of depression. Cognitive behavioral therapists help clients change the negative styles of thinking and behaving that are often associated with depression.

**Interpersonal therapy (IPT).** This type of therapy helps people understand and work through difficulties in their personal relationships that may cause depression or make it worse. Therapists may help you explore the causes of your actions, such as past experiences.

Therapists often draw on different forms of psychotherapy, tailoring treatment to the needs of a client. No one form of psychotherapy is best for everybody. The level of comfort and trust between the client and the therapist is more important than the type of psychotherapy used.

Depression that is severe or keeps coming back will generally require both medication (or ECT, under special conditions) and psychotherapy.

*This is the second in a three-part series of articles on depression. Read the next in the series, “[Steps to take in finding help and support](#).”*

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