

Am I Depressed?

Depression affects nearly one in six people at some point in their lives. Anyone can become depressed, but many experts believe genetics play a role. Having a parent or sibling with depression increases your risk of developing the disorder. Women are twice as likely as men to become depressed. And men exhibit different signs of depression than women do. They may become irritable, angry, or unhappy with their jobs, and may not show any signs of sadness. They might feel hopeless or helpless. Depression is not a sign of weakness or a negative personality. It is a serious medical illness..... a health problem related to changes in the brain, and the top cause of disability in American adults. Our culture admires will power and mental toughness and is quick to label anyone who falls short of that, as a whiner. But, people who have clinical depression are not lazy or feeling sorry for themselves. Nor can they "will" depression to go away. Some life events cause sadness or disappointment, but do not become clinical depression. Grief is normal after a death, divorce, loss of a job, or diagnosis with a serious health problem. One clue that helps determine the need for treatment: the sadness is constant every day, most of the day. When people are weathering difficult times appropriately, they can usually be distracted or cheered up for short periods of time.

There are certain ways to tell if you are or someone you know is suffering from depression. Here are noticeable signs or red flags to look out for:

1. Sad mood – (loss of interest in life)
2. Insomnia (early-morning wakening), or excessive amount of sleep
3. Fatigue, decreased energy level
4. Difficulty concentrating, making decisions
5. No longer engages in previously enjoyable activities, including sex
6. Loss of or increase in appetite ---- weight loss or gain
7. Persistent aches, pains, headaches, cramps, digestive problems
8. A sense of guilt or worthlessness, lack of hope or sense of purpose
9. Recurring thoughts of death or suicide

Major depression is an episode of sadness or apathy along with other symptoms that last at least two consecutive weeks and is severe enough to interrupt daily activities. The warning signs include talk about death or suicide, threatening to hurt people, or engaging in aggressive or risky behavior. Anyone who appears to be suicidal should be taken seriously. The national suicide hotline is 1-800-784-2433, or 1-800-273-8255. The local contact (for Colorado) is Metro Crisis Line at 888-885-1222.

It is important that you find out whether or not you are suffering from depression or bipolar disorder. It is highly recommended (strongly suggested) that you seek a professional diagnosis from a psychiatrist or medical doctor. In diagnosing depression, there is no lab test for it. To make an accurate diagnosis, doctors rely on a patient's description of the symptoms. You'll be asked about your medical history and medication use since these may contribute to symptoms of depression. Discussing moods, behaviors, and daily activities can help reveal the severity and type of depression. This is a critical step in determining the most effective treatment.

Here are tools you can use at home, to help you with that, until you see a mental health professional:

<http://www.everydayhealth.com/depression/depression-at-work-is-it-you-or-the-job.aspx>

<http://www.everydayhealth.com/quizzes/how-much-do-you-know-about-depression.aspx>

<http://psychcentral.com/quizzes/bipolarquiz.htm>

There are many types of depression and depression can be triggered by different things, some of which are: poor diet, a Vitamin D deficiency, insomnia, hypothyroidism, low self-esteem, a chemical imbalance, hormonal changes, loneliness, environmental conditions (being incarcerated or living in a state where there is rarely sunshine, living in a homeless shelter), abuse or other trauma, family dynamics, relationships, circumstances ---- being homeless, being unemployed or unhappy with the job you have, experiencing the loss of a loved one, divorce, surgery, aging, loss of independence, some medications (including antidepressants), or a chronic illness or condition, such as cancer, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's, alcoholism or other substance abuse, or diabetes. Experts think that, while stress can trigger depression, one must first be biologically prone to develop the disorder.

One type of depression is **cyclothymia**, which refers to a condition characterized by both the “down” and “up” mood swings. Cyclothymia differs from bipolar disorder (formerly known as manic depression) in that, neither the highs nor the lows are sufficiently severe or lengthy to meet the definitions for mania or major depressive episodes.

Upward mood swings, which in milder form, may be called hypomania (the intensity of symptoms is below the level of mania), aren't simply normal, good moods but involve changes in energy, speed of thought, self-concept, spending or sexual activities, or a decreased need for sleep, that are outside the norm for a person. Some experts believe that cyclothymia is a milder form of bipolar disorder. Others view it as a related, but distinct condition.

Then, there is **seasonal affective disorder** (SAD). This usually occurs during a season, normally winter, when the weather is cold and gloomy and people tend to stay in more, therefore, lack a sufficient amount of sunshine. It is also a very lonely and difficult time for those who are alone on holidays.

There is also **postpartum depression**, which occurs after a woman gives birth to a child. Nearly 12% develop a more intense, dark mood that lingers even as their baby thrives. The symptoms are the same as those of major depression. An important difference is that the baby's well-being is also at stake. A depressed mother may have trouble enjoying and bonding with her infant.

Another type of depression is called **Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder** that addresses symptoms that had been previously labeled as “childhood bipolar disorder” which can be diagnosed in children up to age 18 years who exhibit persistent irritability and frequent episodes of extreme, out-of-control behavior.

And, yet another is what is now called **Persistent Depressive Disorder**, formerly labeled Dysthymia (a mild form of depression), which consists of additional symptoms than before.

There is also **Pre-Menstrual Dysphoric Disorder**, which usually occurs right before a menstrual period.

Depression in children is a common occurrence. In the United States, depression affects 2% of grade school kids and about one in 10 teenagers. It interferes with the ability to play, make friends, and complete schoolwork. Symptoms are similar to depression in adults, but some children may appear angry or engage in risky behavior, called "acting out." Depression can be difficult to diagnose in children.

Although many teens are moody, argumentative, and intrigued by "the dark side," prolonged sadness or irritability is not normal for teens. When unhappiness lasts more than two weeks, it may be a sign of depression. Other signs a teen may need help include: being constantly sad or irritable even with friends, taking no pleasure in favorite activities, or a sudden drop in grades.

Depression in seniors can be the root cause of memory problems, confusion, and in some cases, delusions. Caregivers and doctors may mistake these problems for signs of dementia, or an age-related decline in memory. Getting treatment lifts the cloud for the majority of older people with depression. Psychotherapy is particularly useful for people who can't or don't want to take medication.

GOOD NEWS! There are solutions to help overcome depression.

Research suggests **exercise** is a potent weapon against mild to moderate depression. Physical activity releases endorphins that can help boost mood. Regular exercise is also linked to higher self-esteem, better sleep, less stress, and more energy. Any type of moderate activity, from swimming to housework, can help. Choose something you enjoy and aim for 20 to 30 minutes, four or five times a week.

Pets --- A playful puppy or wise-mouthed parrot is no substitute for medication or talk therapy. But researchers say pets can ease the symptoms of mild to moderate depression in many people. Pets provide unconditional love, relieve loneliness, and give patients a sense of purpose. Studies have found pet owners have less trouble sleeping and better overall health.

Because loneliness goes hand-in-hand with depression, developing a **social support** network can be an important part of treatment. This may include joining a support group, finding an online support community, or making a genuine effort to see friends and family more often. Even joining a book club or taking classes at your gym can help you connect with people on a regular basis.

Light therapy has shown promise as an effective treatment not only for SAD, but for some other types of depression, as well. It involves sitting in front of a specially-designed light box that provides either a bright or dim light for a prescribed amount of time each day. Light therapy may be used in conjunction with other treatments. Talk to your doctor about getting a light box and the recommended length of time for its use.

Vagus nerve stimulation (VNS) can help patients with treatment-resistant depression that does not improve with medication. VNS is like a pacemaker for the brain. The surgically implanted device sends electrical pulses to the brain through the vagus nerve in the neck. These pulses are believed to ease depression by affecting mood areas of the brain.

Another option for patients with treatment-resistant or severe melancholic depression is **electroconvulsive therapy** (ECT). This treatment uses electric charges to create a controlled seizure. Patients are not conscious for the procedure. ECT helps 80% to 90% of patients who receive it, giving new hope to those who don't improve with medication or talk therapy.

A newer option for people with stubborn depression is **repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation** (rTMS). This treatment aims electromagnetic pulses at the skull. It stimulates a tiny electrical current in a part of the brain linked to depression. rTMS does not cause a seizure and appears to have few side effects. But doctors are still fine-tuning this treatment.

Studies suggest different types of **talk therapy** can fight mild to moderate depression. The focus in **cognitive behavioral therapy** is to change thoughts and behaviors that contribute to depression. The old advice to "accentuate the positive" has advanced into a practice that can ease depression. It's called cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). People learn new ways of thinking and behaving. Negative "self-talk" and behavior is identified and replaced with more upbeat thoughts and a more positive mood. Used alone or with medication, CBT works for many people.

Interpersonal therapy identifies how your relationships impact your mood.

Psychodynamic psychotherapy helps people understand how their behavior and mood are affected by unresolved issues and unconscious feelings. Some patients find a few months of therapy are all they need, while others continue long term.

In the midst of major depression, you may feel hopeless and helpless. But, the fact is, this condition is highly treatable. More than 80% of people get better with medication, talk therapy, or a combination of the two. Even when these therapies fail to help, there are cutting-edge treatments (such as the above-mentioned forms of treatment) that pick up the slack.

Depression is one issue I work with in my private practice. Many doctors and mental health professionals prescribe medications to treat depression. Studies have shown that a combination of talk therapy and medications are the recommended, effective method in lifting depression. In my practice, I choose the more holistic approach in treating it. In addition to cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), I use **Emotional Freedom Technique** (EFT) which is so highly effective (and so unique) that it yields permanent results without the use of medications, and in a much shorter amount of time than traditional talk therapy. It is not invasive, has no side effects, and is not mind-altering. To learn more about EFT, please go to my "Therapies" page on my web site.