

Understanding Major Depression

Major depression is a psychiatric disorder in which a person experiences a very low mood, or *depressed mood*. The person may also have a loss of interest in activities and low energy. Depression differs from feeling "blue," in that it causes severe enough problems to interfere with a person's day-to-day functioning.

The cause of major depression is unknown. Theories suggest that there may be more than one cause. Biochemical theories suggest that two chemicals, *norepinephrine* and *serotonin*, play an important role in depression. Imbalances of these chemicals may be caused by genetic factors, early experiences (such as the loss of a parent at an early age), or both. Between 10% and 15% of people experience an episode of depression during their lifetime.

Depression can happen at any point in a person's life. Some people experience depression but then fully recover from the disorder. Other people struggle with depression throughout much of their lives. People struggling with depression can nevertheless lead very useful and successful lives, as President Abraham Lincoln and the writer Ernest Hemingway did.

Major depression is diagnosed with a clinical interview. The interviewer checks to see whether the person has experienced severe symptoms for at least 2 weeks. Less severe symptoms over a more extended period of time may be diagnosed as *dysthymic disorder*.

Major depression is a psychiatric illness that is diagnosed with a clinical interview. Major depression occurs in 10-15% of people.

SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

The primary symptoms of depression include low mood, as well as problems with activity level, sleep, appetite, and thinking. A person does not have to have all the symptoms listed below to receive a diagnosis of major depression.

Common symptoms of depression include the following:

- Depressed mood
- Decreased interest or pleasure
- Feeling worthless, hopeless, or helpless
- Guilt
- Suicidality
- Change in appetite and/or weight
- Sleep disturbances (too much or too little)

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- Lethargy or agitation
- Fatigue
- Problems with attention, concentration, and making decisions

FREQUENTLY ASSOCIATED SYMPTOMS

Some people with depression may experience other psychiatric symptoms, although these symptoms are not among those used to diagnose depression. They may include *hallucinations* (hearing, seeing, feeling, or smelling things that aren't there) or *delusions* (unusual beliefs that other people don't have, such as persecutory delusions), when their mood is depressed. These symptoms usually go away when their mood is normal.

Common symptoms of depression include:

- Depressed mood
- Weight/appetite and sleep changes
- Changes in energy and activity level
- Feeling worthless, helpless, hopeless, guilty, suicidal
- Concentration/attention problems

SIMILAR PSYCHIATRIC DISORDERS

Major depression shares symptoms with other major psychiatric disorders. People with bipolar disorder, schizoaffective disorder, or schizophrenia may experience symptoms of depression, but there are important differences as well. People with bipolar disorder also have manic episodes, whereas people with major depression do not. People with schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder may experience depression, but when their mood is normal they may continue to experience hallucinations and delusions.

The symptoms of major depression may overlap with those of other psychiatric disorders.

TREATMENT

Special medications called *antidepressants* are often used to treat major depression. For depressions that don't respond to medication, sometimes *electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)* can be an effective treatment.

Many people with depression may also benefit from psychotherapy and family treatment to help them deal with the disruptive aspects of the disorder.

Effective treatments for major depression include medication, counseling, and sometimes ECT.

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FURTHER READING

- Burns, D. (1999). *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* (rev. ed.). New York: Bantam.
- Copeland, M. E. (1992). *The Depression Workbook: A Guide for Living with Depression and Manic Depression*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.
- DePaulo, J. R., Jr. (2002). *Understanding Depression: What We Know and What You Can Do about It*. New York: Wiley.
- Papolos, D. F., & Papolos, J. (1997). *Overcoming Depression* (3rd ed.). New York: HarperPerennial.
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