

What is Depression? Information for clients and their families

Depression is when normal feelings like being sad, down, grumpy, or irritable are very intense, go on too long and get in the way of normal life. Depressed feelings happen to everyone sometimes, especially after a loss or disappointment. When they happen too much and interfere with life—get in the way of doing things you want to do and need to do—is when it is important to get help.

Depression can be a specific episode or repeated episodes that are out of the ordinary for the person. The episode can be mild, moderate or severe. Severe depressions usually involve suicidal thoughts or behaviors. In some cases, depression can be chronic.

Depression is a very common mental health problem worldwide. Between 5-10% of children have a major depressive episode.

Signs and Symptoms Depression

Feelings

- Sad mood, despondency, despair
- Irritability, anger, or hostility
- Hard time sleeping or sleeping too much
- No energy, bored
- Extreme sensitivity to (and easily upset about) things that happen
- Difficulty concentrating
- Physical aches and pains such as headaches or stomachaches

Thoughts

- Down on self, thoughts of not being worth anything, or not being lovable
- Hopeless that things can change
- Believe cannot change things for the better
- No or less interest in socializing with friends or doing things you used to like
- Thinking it would be better to be dead, thoughts of killing self

Behavior

- Withdrawing, stopping doing much of anything, isolating from people
- Poor communication
- Crying about little things or crying a lot
- Difficulty with relationships
- Absences from school or a drop in school performance
- Talking about or trying to run away from home
- Alcohol or substance abuse
- Hurting self on purpose, suicide attempt

Causes of Depression

Depression isn't caused by any one thing but is usually happens because of a combination of things. It can be caused by stress, chronic illness, or chemicals in the brain (not working like they should). Stressful life events like the death of a loved one, a divorce, a move to a new area, or a breakup with a girlfriend or boyfriend can bring on depressive feelings. Certain times of life when there are many changes, like entering the teenage years, can be especially stressful and lead to depression. Sometimes, depression can seem to come out of the blue. Depression sometimes runs in families, so someone with a close relative who has depression may be more likely to experience depression.

When to get professional help for Depression

Since everyone feels sad or down sometimes, it is important to pay attention when the feelings, thoughts and behaviors are very intense, go on too long and get in the way of life. Some symptoms can be dangerous or risky so it is very important to talk to someone—a parent, trusted adult, school counselor, doctor or nurse—right away when these occur (see below):

Get help right away when:

You have thoughts about killing self or thinking it would be better to be dead.

You are doing things on purpose to hurt self.

You are drinking and taking drugs to block out negative feelings.

Treatment for Depression

The good news is that there is help for depression. There are three different types of treatment that work.

1. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT is a time-limited, problem-focused intervention that teaches how to change unhelpful thoughts and how to learn new behaviors like taking steps toward goals, spending more time doing positive activities, and learning how to problem solve. The therapist and client identify unhelpful thoughts and behaviors and come up with new ones to practice and try out.
2. Interpersonal Therapy (ITP). ITP is a time-limited, problem-focused intervention that focuses on patterns of interactions with other people and teaches more positive ways to have relationships and friendships. The therapist and client identify unhelpful patterns of interactions and come up with new ones to practice and try out.
3. Antidepressant medicine. These medicines work on the brain and uplift and calm down moods. Medicine is usually not the only treatment but can be taken along with doing therapy.

The majority of people who are depressed can recover and be back to normal with 10-20 sessions of therapy, often without medication. It is important to know that CBT and ITP are treatments that require active participation and practicing new ways of thinking and behaving, outside of the therapy sessions, in order to work. Just like medicine only works when it is taken, therapy only works when people do things a new way. Treatment takes work, but it will pay off!

Sometimes depression comes back, so part of therapy is learning warning signs and having a plan to put into place. It also really helps when a caregiver is part of therapy and available to help support the new thoughts and behaviors. If there is concern about safety, this will be a priority of your treatment. There will be a safety plan.

Be a good consumer:

1. Ask the therapist what kind of therapy is available; get a description of what is involved in the therapy (e.g., how long, how to tell when better, what skills are learned).
2. Is there practice? Remember, learning new thoughts and behaviors is the “cure”. Therapy should involve practice between sessions.
3. Treatment for depression always involves getting out in the world and doing activities. If the treatment does not involve help to be more active and involved it is not likely to work.
4. If you don't start feeling better, start asking questions and consider options.