



What is Depression?

Many people experiencing the symptoms of depression might begin to wonder if there is something really wrong with them. One typical fear is that they might be going crazy. Unfortunately, the reactions and comments from other people such as "Just get yourself together!" are not very helpful.

Although you might feel alone in your struggle against depressive moods, the reality is that many people experience these moods from time to time, or even regularly. In fact, it is estimated that 1 in every 4 people experience significantly depressed mood at some time in their life.

Depression can affect any kind of person at any stage of their life. You may be an introvert or an extrovert, socially active or shy, youthful or elderly, male or female, wealthy or poor. Whatever your distinction, you can become depressed. That means that any person you know is fair game. So remember, you are not alone.

Depression is a word used in everyday language to describe a number of feelings including sadness, frustration, disappointment and sometimes lethargy. However, in clinical practice, the term "Depression" or "Major Depression" differs from these everyday 'down' periods in three main ways:

- Major depression is more intense
- Major depression lasts longer (two weeks or more)
- Major depression significantly interferes with effective day-to-day functioning.

Depression as a Syndrome

A syndrome is a collection of events, behaviours or feelings that often but not always, go together. The depression syndrome is a collection of feelings and behaviours that have been found to characterise depressed people as a group. You may find that you experience all or some of these feelings and behaviours. There are many individual differences to the number of symptoms and the extent to which different symptoms are experienced. These symptoms are described below.

Mood

Depression is considered to be a disorder of mood. Individuals who are depressed describe low mood that has persisted for longer than two weeks. In mild forms of depression, individuals may not feel bad all day but still describe a dismal outlook and a sense of gloom. Their mood may lift with a positive experience, but fall again with even a minor disappointment. In severe depression, a low mood could persist throughout the day, failing to lift even when pleasant things occur. The low mood may fluctuate during the day – it may be worse in the morning or relatively better in the afternoon. This is called 'diurnal variation', which often accompanies a more severe type of depression.

In addition to sadness, another mood common to depression is anxiety.

Thinking

Individuals who are depressed think in certain ways, and this thinking is an essential feature of depression. It is as much a key symptom of depression as mood or physical symptoms. Those who are depressed tend to see themselves in a negative light. They dwell on how bad they feel, how the world is full of difficulties, how hopeless the future seems and how things might never get better. People who are depressed often have a sense of guilt, blaming themselves for everything including the fact they think negatively. Often their self-esteem and self-confidence can become very low.

Physical

Some people experience physical symptoms of depression.

- Sleep patterns could change. Some people may experience difficulty falling asleep. Some may wake during the night and find it difficult to go back to sleep, or wake up early in the morning. Others may find themselves sleeping more and have difficulty staying awake.
- Appetite may decline and weight loss occurs, while others eat more than usual and thus gain weight.
- Sexual interest may decline.
- Energy levels may fall, as does motivation to carry out everyday activities. Depressed individuals may stop doing the things they used to enjoy because they feel unmotivated or lethargic.

Interacting with Other People

Many depressed people express concern about their personal relationships. They may become unhappy and dissatisfied with their family, and other close relationships. They may feel shy and anxious when they are with other people, especially in a group. They may feel lonely and isolated, yet at the same time are unwilling or unable to reach out to others, even when they have the opportunities for doing so.

What Causes Depression?

It is important to understand that depression is not caused by one thing, but probably by a combination of factors interacting with one another. These factors can be grouped into two broad categories – *biology* and *psychology*. Many biological and psychological factors interact in depression, although precisely which specific factors interact may differ from person to person.

Biological Factors

The biological factors that might have some effect on depression include: genes, hormones, and brain chemicals.

Genetic Factors

Depression often runs in families, which suggests that individuals may inherit genes that make them vulnerable to developing depression. However, one may inherit an increased vulnerability to the illness, but not necessarily the illness itself. Although many people may inherit the vulnerability, a great many of them may never suffer a depressive illness.

Hormones

Research has found that there are some hormonal changes that occur in depression. The brain goes through some changes before and during a depressive episode, and certain parts of the brain are affected. This might result in an over- or under-production of some hormones, which may account for some of the symptoms of depression. Medication treatment can be effective in treating these conditions.

Brain Chemicals (Neurotransmitters)

Nerve cells in the brain communicate to each other by specific chemical substances called neurotransmitters. It is believed that during depression, there is reduced activity of one or more of these neurotransmitter systems, and this disturbs certain areas of the brain that regulate functions such as sleep, appetite, sexual drive, and perhaps mood. The reduced level of neurotransmitters results in reduced communication between the nerve cells and accounts for the typical symptoms of depression. Many antidepressant drugs increase the neurotransmitters in the brain.

Psychological Factors

Thinking

Many thinking patterns are associated with depression. These thinking patterns include:

- Overstressing the negative

- Taking the responsibility for bad events but not for good events
- Having inflexible rules about how one should behave
- Thinking that you know what others are thinking and that they are thinking badly of you

Loss

Sometimes people experience events where loss occurs, and this can bring on depression. The experience of loss may include the loss of a loved one through bereavement or separation, loss of a job, loss of a friendship, loss of a promotion, loss of face, loss of support, etc.

Sense of Failure

Some people may stake their happiness on achieving particular goals, such as getting high grades, getting a particular job, earning a certain amount of profit from a business venture, or finding a life partner. If for some reason they are not able to achieve those goals, they might believe that they have failed somehow, and it is this sense of failure that can bring on, or increase, depression.

Stress

An accumulation of stressful life events may also bring on depression. Stressful events include situations such as unemployment, financial worries, serious difficulties with spouses, parents or children, physical illness, and major changes in life circumstances.