

# What About Depression?

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Depression is a normal part of the human experience. Ancient philosophers and biblical writers describe it. While depression may be an inherent part of the human condition it is not something to be ignored or something that we can "just snap out of." In fact, depressive illness is one of the most treatable of human illnesses. Depression knows no boundaries -- it affects people of any age, race, gender, or religious affiliation. National Institute of Mental Health studies indicate that depressive illness strikes 10 - 20 million Americans each year. Depression can be a painful and debilitating ordeal for those who experience it but it can be successfully treated.

## What is Depression?

Depression is a "whole-illness," involving your body, mood, thoughts, behavior, as well as your relationships. It affects the way you eat and sleep, the way you feel about yourself, and the way you think about things. Depression is not a passing blue mood. It is not a sign of personal weakness or a condition that can be willed or wished away. People experiencing depression cannot merely "pull themselves together" and get better. When depressed feelings become pervasive and your mood is generally sad, when feelings of helplessness and hopelessness are persistent, when your responses both mental and physical are slowed, you may be experiencing a depressive illness.

## Symptoms of Depression

Not everyone who is depressed experiences every symptom. Some people experience a few symptoms, some many. Also, severity of symptoms varies with individuals.

- Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that you once enjoyed, including sex
- Insomnia, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping
- Appetite and/or weight loss or overeating and weight gain
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being "slowed down"
- Thoughts of death or suicide, suicide attempts
- Restlessness, irritability
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain

Depression often causes people to withdraw from others, to isolate themselves. Socially the depressed person can become reclusive. Spiritually the depressed person can give up

on life. Self-esteem is low, life seems meaningless and any attempt to make things better appears hopeless.

### **Causes of Depression**

There are many theories about the causes of depression, which explain how depression affects a person physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. Scientific research has established a link between biochemical imbalances in the brain and depression. Studies show that people who experience depression have imbalances in neurotransmitters, the chemical substances through which the brain cells communicate with one another. The types of biochemical brain imbalances most frequently linked to depression are: deficiencies in serotonin, which may cause disruptions in, sleep patterns, irritability or anxiety; decreased amount of norepinephrine which may contribute to fatigue or depressed moods, and; heightened levels of cortisol (hormone) which may intensify reactions to stress, anger, and fear.

In addition to biochemical factors, psychological makeup also plays a role in vulnerability to depression. People who have low self-esteem, who consistently view themselves and the world with pessimism, or who are readily overwhelmed by stress are prone to depression.

A serious loss, chronic illness, difficult relationship, financial problem, or any unwelcome change in life patterns can also trigger a depressive episode. Very often, a combination of chemical, emotional, and environmental factors is involved in the onset of a depressive illness.

### **Treatment for Depression**

Counseling and psychotherapy have been proven effective treatments for depression. In some cases medications may also be necessary and should be prescribed by a psychiatrist who has expertise in monitoring the effects and side effects of psychoactive medications. It is important that a person experiencing depression also have a physical examination to be certain that the depression is not the result of organic disease.

Depending upon the therapist's understanding of the individual's needs and his or her theoretical orientation the therapist will approach depression differently. A cognitive/behavioral therapist helps a person change negative styles of thinking and behaving often associated with depression. Interpersonal therapists focus on an individual's personal relationships that both cause and exacerbate the depression. Psychodynamic therapists focus on the person's internal psychological conflicts that are typically thought to be rooted in childhood as well as other past experiences and how they impact current reality. An increased sense of well-being and a renewed meaning, direction, purpose and enthusiasm for life are the outcome of all these approaches to understanding and treating depression.

### **Where to Turn for Help**

Pastoral Counseling of Northern Virginia has a staff of pastoral counselors who are trained and equipped to diagnose and offer therapy to persons experiencing depression.

We have a network of local psychiatrists that we work with if a consultation for medication may be indicated as a part of treatment. Pastoral Counseling of Northern Virginia has offices located in Fairfax, Manassas, McLean and Springfield.

### **Hope for Depression**

Depression is an illness that forms a physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual response to the events of our lives and that impacts our body, mind, and spirit. But it is also an opportunity to reexamine our lives, our goals, our expectations, and our actions. In therapy a person experiencing depression can develop new strengths and new perspectives, which lead to a renewed enthusiasm for life and the challenges it holds for each of us.

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