

# Understanding and treating depression

Sometimes people get depressed after a divorce in the family, death or ending a relationship. Other times—depression just happens. Depression is a word often overused to describe a bad mood or temporary feelings of unhappiness. But, depression is a serious illness that interferes with normal living. Being depressed doesn't mean that a person is weak, a failure, or isn't really trying—it means he or she needs treatment.

## Depression: What is it?

At times everyone feels sad or unhappy, but these feelings generally pass within a few days. Depression is a common but serious mental illness that negatively affects a person's mood, behavior, relationships, physical health and appearance, and ability to manage everyday life. Most people who experience depression experience the symptoms for several weeks or longer and need treatment to get better. They are not able to "just snap out of it."

Depression is thought to be caused by a combination of brain chemical imbalances, genetics, difficult life events, and possible co-existing medical conditions. Although there are several types of depressive disorders, the most common are:

- Major depression: severe symptoms of major depression interfere with the person's ability to work, sleep, eat, and enjoy life. An episode of major depression may occur only once in a person's lifetime. But more often, a person can have several episodes.
- Persistent depressive disorder: depressive symptoms that last a long time (two years or longer), but are less severe than those of major depression.

## Recognizing the Signs

Depression is one of the most common mental disorders in the United States. In 2015, approximately 6.7% of adults, or 16.1 million people, experienced at least one major depressive episode in the past year. Women are more likely to be diagnosed with depression than men. Depression can also affect children and teens, although many times the illness goes undiagnosed.

Depression affects people in different ways. Some people experience only a few symptoms while others have many. Some of the signs and symptoms of depression include:

- Persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and unhappiness.
- Frequent physical symptoms, such as muscle pains, headaches, stomach aches.
- Loss of interest in activities or hobbies the person used to enjoy.
- Sleep problems: insomnia, early morning awakening, or excessive sleeping.
- Changes in appetite with unusual weight gain or loss.
- Irritability, restlessness, and agitation.
- Withdrawal from friends and social activities.

- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions.
- Decreased energy and feelings of fatigue and “heaviness”.
- Thoughts of death or suicide.

How severe the symptoms are, and how long they last, will vary depending on the person and the stage of his or her particular illness.

## Treatment Options

Fortunately there are effective treatments for depression, even if symptoms are severe. The earlier that treatment begins, the better. Treatment for depression may include different types of therapy, medications such as anti-depressants, or a combination of therapy and medication.

People who think they or a loved one may have depression can start by making an appointment with a healthcare provider such as their physician.

Certain medications and some medical conditions, such as a thyroid disorder, can cause the same symptoms as depression. A doctor can rule out these possibilities by doing a physical exam, interview, and lab tests. If the doctor can find no medical condition that may be causing the depression, the next step is a psychological evaluation by a psychiatrist, psychologist, or trained mental health professional.

Treatment can help people find relief from their symptoms and learn to manage their moods and feelings. Sometimes it takes trial and error to find the most effective medications. People with severe depression who do not respond to medication and therapy may choose to try other treatments such as ECT (electro-convulsive therapy) or other brain stimulation therapies.

If you or a loved one is experiencing any of the symptoms above, reach out and get help! You do not have to suffer alone.

**Help is available. For additional information, visit [MagellanHealth.com/MYMH](https://MagellanHealth.com/MYMH)**

*Source: National Institute of Mental Health*

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