

# About Depression

EVERYONE FEELS "DOWN," gloomy, discouraged or sad from time to time. For some people, however, this depressed mood persists. When symptoms last for two weeks or more and are so severe that they interfere with daily living, it is called depression.

Depression affects approximately 10 out of every 100 people, occurring most often in adults between the ages of 24 and 44. Nearly twice as many women as men are diagnosed with depression. However, recent research suggests this gap is narrowing.

In the 1980s, an extensive study was conducted in Edmonton to determine the prevalence of certain mental illnesses. Of more than 3,000 people interviewed, 5.9% of the men and 11.4% of the women had experienced major depression.

Source: Bland, R., Orn, H. & Newman, S. (1988). *Lifetime Prevalence of Psychiatric Disorders in Edmonton. Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 77 (Suppl. 338), 24-32.

## You're in good company

Many well-known people have experienced depression. George Washington, Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln were all reported to have black periods of depression. Newscaster Mike Wallace, humorist Art Buchwald, actor Rod Steiger, economist John Kenneth Galbraith and figure skater Elizabeth Manley have all publicly discussed their experiences with depression. Sylvia Plath wrote about her depression in her novels and poems, and writer William Styron chronicled his struggles with the disorder in his book, *Darkness Visible*.

## Depression Across the Age Span

CLINICAL DEPRESSION USUALLY occurs in adulthood. It can also affect children, adolescents and older people, but can be difficult to recognize in these groups.

**Note:** A thorough assessment by a mental health professional is necessary for an accurate diagnosis of depression. The presence of the following symptoms does not necessarily mean that a person is clinically depressed.

## Adults

➤ *"I have bad days and really bad days. I feel totally and utterly screwed by life. It has no meaning. It's just a void. I sleep late, maybe have a coffee, and then go back to bed. What did I do to deserve this? I hate 'perky' people who tell me just to cheer up. They don't know what it's like. Don't they think I'd cheer up if I could?"*

➤ *"Depression is a serious, life-threatening illness. I never believed that anyone could feel so awful and live through it. It was so hard to move, to get out of bed each morning, get ready and get dressed. Even walking was hard—like walking chest-deep through water. Throughout the day, I'd fantasize about different ways to kill myself, not that I had the energy to carry any of the plans out."*

Depression is a very personal and distinctive condition. You don't have to have all of the signs or symptoms to be clinically depressed. But, to be diagnosed as having clinical depression, your symptoms need to be persistent. Some people with several of these symptoms may simply be experiencing a temporary and short-lived sadness.

- **feeling sad**  
Feeling sad or blue most of the time, most days.
- **marked decrease in interest or in pleasurable activities**  
Activities that used to bring pleasure such as pursuing hobbies, spending time with family members or engaging in sexual activity, just aren't enjoyable any more.
- **changing appetite**  
Experiencing an increase or decrease in appetite may result in weight gain or loss.
- **disturbed sleeping habits**  
Experiencing difficulties in falling asleep, waking up early in the morning or sleeping more than normal.
- **change in activity**  
Experiencing restlessness or moving significantly slower than usual.
- **fatigue or loss of energy**  
A depressed person may complain of not having the energy to do things such as getting out of bed in the morning or going to work.

- **feeling guilty or helpless, having low self-esteem**

You may feel very guilty over small or trivial matters. They may believe that they have little or no influence over events in their lives.

- **decreased ability to concentrate and/or make decisions**  
You may be unable to concentrate, causing you to have difficulty remembering names or the content of television programs. People may delay making decisions because they are clinically depressed.
- **thinking about death or suicide**  
You may think seriously about killing yourself and may make plans to do so.

For information on dealing with suicidal thoughts and feelings, see the section in this handbook on *Suicide Prevention*.

Depression can also affect children, adolescents and older people; however, the signs and symptoms of the disorder may be somewhat different in these groups. Some of these differences are discussed below.

## Children

Generally, children do not express their thoughts and feelings as clearly as adults, so their depression may not be as evident. Clues that a child may be depressed include:

- loss of appetite or refusing to eat favourite foods;

☛ *"The sense of loss was consuming. I felt that I had lost everything. I am ashamed to say that I was filled with shame at having this kind of illness."*

☛ *"Most of the time I can sort of control my negative thoughts. But sometimes I feel this black rage well up in me and there's nothing I can do except go home and sit in silence, waiting to fall asleep. Sleeping is less destructive than some of the other things I'd like to do. I literally sleep it off."*

☛ *"It was the worst experience I ever had. It was like a personal hell. My life had no meaning any more. I had no reason for living. I had given up hope. I'm still crawling out of it. Participating in life, being with people and doing things that interest me have all helped."*

- ☛ sleeping problems such as having nightmares;
- ☛ problems at school with behaviour or poor grades where there had been no significant problems before; and
- ☛ significant change from usual behaviour such as becoming withdrawn, sulking or being aggressive.

## Adolescents

Young people can experience many upheavals during their teen years, making it difficult to recognize the difference between serious depression and their reaction to the normal "bumps in the road" that often occur during this time of life. Some signs that suggest that an adolescent may be depressed are:

- ☛ using alcohol and drugs;
- ☛ falling grades, poor attendance, or behavioral problems at school;
- ☛ withdrawing from friends and family;
- ☛ having chronic and serious conflicts with parents after long-standing good relations; and
- ☛ anti-social behaviour or problems with the law.

## Older Adults

Depression in the older adult is a growing concern as our population ages. Some factors (not unique to this age group) that contribute to depression include:

- ☛ personal losses such as the death of a spouse or friend;

- ☛ declining physical health and resulting mood disturbance;
- ☛ reacting to drugs prescribed for various physical problems; and
- ☛ isolating from others.

## Types

THERE ARE TWO basic types of depression: major depression and the depressed phase of bipolar disorder.

### Major depression

This is also referred to as major depressive disorder or biochemical, clinical, endogenous or biological depression. It involves a severely depressed mood that persists for at least two weeks. Episodes of depression may start suddenly or slowly and can occur several times throughout a person's life.

There are several sub-types of major depression.

- ☛ Melancholia is very severe, having a number of major physical symptoms such as sleep and appetite disturbances, weight loss and withdrawal.
- ☛ Psychotic depression is also severe with physical symptoms like those above as well as hallucinations or delusions.
- ☛ With atypical depression, a person experiences a great deal of anxiety along with panic attacks.

☛ "Sometimes I think that I have two personalities—one in the summer and another during the winter months. I tried skating hiking, skiing, you name it. But nothing changed how negatively I felt about winter time. Until I heard about SAD, I didn't know what my problem was."

☛ Chronic depressive symptoms (or dysthymic disorder) is a long-term, mild depression that lasts for at least two years. It often begins in adolescence, spans several decades and can have an adverse effect on personality.

## Bipolar disorder

With this cyclical illness, sometimes called manic depression, moods can fluctuate between extreme happiness and frantic activity (the manic phase) to profound depression. For more information on this condition, refer to the booklet, *Bipolar Disorder—Where's the Balance?* (see Suggested Reading at the end of this publication).

## Causes

A SPECIFIC CAUSE for depression has not yet been identified, but here are some of the factors likely to be involved.

### Heredity

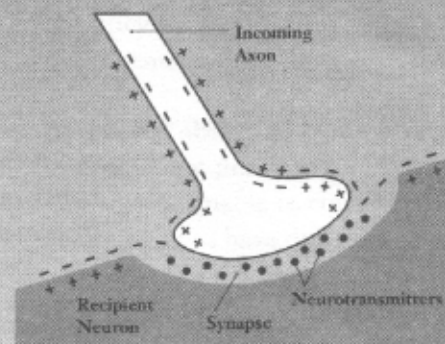
It is likely that the tendency to develop depression is inherited; it seems to run in families. But whether you actually develop the disorder probably also depends on the other factors that follow.

### Physiology

There may be changes or an imbalance in certain chemicals called neurotransmitters in the brain.

For example, reduced daylight hours are believed to affect the production of

## How Neurotransmitters Work



At its most simple level, brain activity involves electrical charges that fire across the space between brain cells. This space is called the synapse. Brain cells have two main parts: the axon and the neuron. With the help of brain chemicals called neurotransmitters, the electrical charges move from the axon of one cell to the neuron of another. If these neurotransmitters get out of balance, electrical activity in the brain is disturbed.

some brain chemicals, such as serotonin, that are important in controlling mood. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) primarily affects people who live at northern latitudes. It involves depression in the winter, and normal mood or mild elation in the summer. Increased exposure to special artificial light is used to reduce the depression.

### Psychological Factors

Factors such as low self-esteem and self-defeating or distorted thinking styles are thought to be connected with depression. Such thinking may include viewing the world as threatening, feeling unable to deal with life's challenges, and believing that the future is hopeless. Making corrections to these faulty thinking styles can result in improved mood and self-esteem.



## **Early Experiences**

Events or circumstances in early childhood which may increase the likelihood of depression in later years include:

- ❖ the death or prolonged absence of a parent;
- ❖ being abandoned or rejected (real or imagined);
- ❖ neglect or lack of loving care;
- ❖ chronic illness and/or lengthy hospitalization; and
- ❖ severe psychological, physical or sexual abuse.

## **Life Events**

Depression often affects people who have experienced physical, psychological or sexual abuse. It is also common in individuals experiencing job loss, financial difficulties, long periods of unemployment, the loss of family members to divorce or death, or marital and family problems.

## **Medical Conditions**

Illnesses such as influenza, hepatitis or mononucleosis, and conditions such as stroke or thyroid problems may contribute. Taking prescription drugs such as blood pressure medications, birth control pills and steroids (e.g., cortisone) may be causes.

## **Childbirth**

Post-partum depression, a form of major depression, usually begins within three weeks after a woman gives birth and may last for several months. It is estimated that 10 per cent of new mothers experience some depressive

symptoms, and that two new mothers out of 1,000 have depression so severe that hallucinations and/or delusions are present.

## **Alcohol or drug abuse**

Alcohol may have a negative effect on mood. Abuse or misuse of alcohol, illegal drugs or prescription medications (tranquillizers and sleeping pills), pain relievers containing narcotics, or anabolic steroids, are likely to contribute to depression.

## **Living with a depressed person**

Living with someone who is chronically and/or severely depressed, and the worry, distress and family disruption that result, all increase the possibility of others in the family becoming depressed.