



## Understanding The Nature of Depression

By

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Most people are touched, either directly or indirectly, by the impacts of depression. Each year, approximately 1 in 15 adults and 1 in 8 teenagers experience a depressive episode. Depression is more than just having a “down day”. It is a debilitating condition that can make functioning difficult and, if left untreated, can lead to severe emotional and behavioral impairment.

### Common Symptoms of Depression

Some of the most common symptoms of depression include:

- Depressed Mood – When someone is depressed, they tend to feel emotionally down all the time. Each movement often feels exhausting.
- Diminished interest or pleasure in almost all activities – People with severe depression tend to lose interest in doing basically anything. They often struggle to find joy in activities, including those that they normally seek out.
- Significant weight gain or weight loss – When someone is depressed, they may lose interest in eating or, alternatively, may begin to eat to numb their pain.
- Sleep Disturbance – People with depression never feel rested, regardless of how much they sleep.
- Agitation – When someone is depressed, they often feel agitated internally and are easily angered.
- Fatigue – People with depression feel exhausted all the time.
- Feelings of Worthlessness - When someone is depressed, they tend to feel worthless, hopeless, and alone. They may also begin to ruminate about past mistakes or losses.
- Diminished ability to think or concentrate – When someone is depressed, they have difficulty making decisions and struggle to stay focused.
- Suicidal Thoughts – The greater the depression, the more prevalent and intense thoughts of dying tends to be.
- Impaired functioning – When someone is depressed, they may have difficulty working, taking care of their family, or themselves.
- Crying for no apparent reason – Some people with depression feel “weepy” all the time.

### Causes of Depression

While we do not know the exact cause of depression in each individual, we do know that there are a number of factors that contribute to the presence of depression. Some of most common issues related to depression are:

- Genetics – Individuals with parents that have experienced depression are between 2 to 4 times as likely to have depression. Some research has found that there may be specific genes that are associated with depression and heredity.
- Physiology – Some research has identified chemical imbalances within the brain during times of depression (i.e. neurotransmitters), while others have focused on specific parts of the brain that may be involved in the presence of depression (i.e. amygdala, the thalamus, and the hippocampus). What is clear from the research is that the brain plays a significant role in the presence of depression.
- Physical Health issues – Depression can be triggered by significant changes in health.
- Situational – Depression can be brought about by life circumstances that overwhelm our normal ability to cope.
- Unresolved anger – Anger that is turned inward and that is not adequately resolved can contribute to the presence of depression.
- Unresolved trauma – Trauma that is unresolved can affect the physical and emotional well-being of an individual and lead to depression.
- Stress – Stress that is extreme and ongoing frequently contributes to depression. If our body and mind begin to wear down, we are more susceptible to disease, health problems, and depression.
- Unresolved conflicts – Conflicts that do not get resolved can contribute to episodes of depression.
- Unresolved family of origin issues – Growing up in a chaotic home or a home where basic emotional needs are not met often leads to depression.

### New Dimensions Can Help If You or Someone You Know Is:

- Depressed or Suicidal
- Stuck and having difficulty making changes
- Dealing with trauma
- Struggling with Panic Attacks
- Having difficulty working or going to school
- Struggling with addictions or substance abuse
- Cutting or doing other self-destructive behaviors
- Struggling with anger issues
- Struggling to get their medications stabilized

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- Borderline Personality Disorder – Many individuals with Borderline Personality Disorder experience depressive episodes. Their struggle to maintain stable relationships and cope with a low self-esteem often triggers depression.
- Unresolved grief – Grief is a normal part of healing from losses. Sometimes, however, people get stuck in grief and depression emerges.
- Substance Abuse – Drug and alcohol abuse can contribute to the presence of depression. In fact, for some people, when they quit using drugs and alcohol, their depression completely disappears.



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## How to Help Someone Who is Depressed

If you know someone who is depressed, it is important to realize that they don't want to feel the way they do. Depression is not something that they chose and is not a defect in their character. Depression is an illness that zaps a person's energy and replaces it with feelings of "doom and gloom." If left untreated, depression can lead to long term health consequences and/or suicide. Fortunately, there are things that you can do to help.

- **Be supportive** – Remember, no one wants to be depressed. A person who is depressed needs support. Let them know that you still care about them and that they are important to you.
- **Give them hope** – Let your loved one know that there is hope and that they are not alone. Depression is a treatable illness.

- **Let them talk** – Words are one of the best tools that we have to deal with emotions. The more we are able to talk through our emotions, the less power that they have over us.
- **Provide encouragement** – When a person is depressed, they often feel like they don't have the energy to do anything or that there is no point in trying. Provide them encouragement so that they can move through the depression rather than becoming stuck within it.
- **Get them help** – The combination of psychotherapy and medication is often very effective in helping alleviate depression. If you have a family member who is struggling, get them help.

## Depression is a Treatable Condition

It is helpful to think of depression as having 3 components that are intertwined. These components are:

- **Mood** – The mood of depression includes feeling down, sad, hopeless, and helpless. When someone is depressed, they may feel exhausted just lifting their head off the pillow in the morning. Some people describe it as a feeling of "walking in water" where every movement takes significant effort. Others describe it as being in a "dark place" where they don't see any light at the end of the tunnel.
- **Thoughts** – When someone is depressed their thoughts tend to focus on how bad things are in their life. They may ruminate about past mistakes or begin to have thoughts that everyone would be better off without them around.
- **Behaviors** – People who are depressed tend to withdraw from others around them. They often quit doing activities that they used to enjoy because they "just don't have the energy for it anymore." They may stay in bed all day or isolate within their own home.

In other words, when someone is depressed, they feel down, think down, and act down. As a result, in order to overcome depression, a person's mood, thoughts, and actions all need to improve.

### Improve your mood by changing your thoughts

Our perceptions and thoughts matter. If we think negative thoughts, we tend to feel worse about ourselves and our situation. Conversely, if we think positive thoughts, we tend to have more hope and feel better overall. Unfortunately, changing negative thoughts into positive thoughts is easier said than done. When a person is depressed, changing their thinking can feel a lot like swimming upstream against a raging river. As a result, it is often easier to change your thoughts by also changing your behavior.

### Improve your mood by changing your actions

Imagine sitting in a dark room all day staring at the wall. How long would it take before you started feeling depressed? Imagine, on the other hand, playing tennis, horseback riding, surfing, going to lunch with a friend, or engaging in some other activity that fully engages your mind and body. How would this engagement affect your thoughts and feelings? Engaging in activities helps lift the mood and helps break the depressive thoughts that often consume a person. The more engaged a person becomes in an activity, the easier it is to change their thoughts and feelings.

### Medications can be helpful

Medications, such as antidepressants, can often help lift a person's mood which then makes it easier for them to change their thoughts and behaviors. Fortunately, there are numerous medication options currently available to treat depression. Some people may only need to take an antidepressant temporarily while others may need to take medications for an extended period of time.

### Psychotherapy can be very effective

Psychotherapy can be very effective in helping a person overcome depression. In therapy, a person is often able to work through those issues that may be causing them to be depressed. They can also learn more effective coping skills and develop strategies to help them create the life that they want.