

DEPRESSION: WHAT IS IT AND HOW CAN I MANAGE IT?



By: Chris Antczak, LPC

Depression is a frequently used term that can be easily misunderstood. In the field of mental health, depression refers to a psychiatric illness characterized by feelings of sadness, lack of interest in formerly enjoyable activities, sleep and appetite disturbances, feelings of worthlessness, and, at times, thoughts of death and dying.

Recent estimates indicate that over 15% of the American population will experience depression at some point in their lives. Depression can affect the quality of interpersonal relationships and, in particular, relationships with spouses and children. There can be significant difficulty in handling one's responsibilities in school and/or in the work environment.

No population of people is immune to depression since it affects individuals across varying ethnic, gender, age, and socioeconomic groups. Depression is heterogeneous, meaning it will be experienced differently by different people. There are diverse causes for depression, such as stressful events, abuse, neglect, genetics, and interpersonal factors. Recovery from depression is most likely when the person is facing few stressful life events and has a solid support network to rely on.

The symptoms of depression often exacerbate one another and tend to span five areas of functioning: emotional, motivational, behavioral, cognitive, and physical. Emotionally, most people who have depression feel sad and dejected. They may describe themselves as feeling "miserable" or "empty," and

they report getting little pleasure from anything. Motivationally, those with depression typically lose the desire to pursue their usual activities. There is a lack of drive or initiative. It may be very challenging to attend work, talk with friends, eat meals, or have sex. Behaviorally, people are usually less active and less productive. They likely spend more time alone and may stay in bed for extended periods of time. Cognitively, depression can cause individuals to hold extremely negative views of themselves. They may consider themselves to be inadequate, undesirable, or inferior. Their sense of hopelessness and helplessness makes them especially vulnerable to suicidal thinking. Physically, people who are depressed may have such ailments as headaches, constipation, dizziness, or general pain. Disturbances in appetite and sleep are particularly common.

Coping is essential to managing depression. Being connected to others, whether friends or family, is fundamental to counteracting the effects of depression. Consider the positive effects of doing volunteer work or caring for a pet. Do things that make you feel good—or that used to—such as art, music, sports, reading, or gardening. Staying active through exercise or movement is a crucial catalyst in improving your mood. Exercise actually assists you in feeling more energized and less fatigued. Your mood is directly affected by what you eat, so be thoughtful in your choices. Detour away from alcohol, refined carbs, high sugar, nicotine, and caffeine. Instead, consider fresh fish, leafy greens, brown rice, fruit, wheat bread, and chicken. Being outside and obtaining a daily minimum of 15 minutes of sunlight boosts mood. Learn healthy sleep habits and secure at least seven hours of sleep per night. Provide yourself stress relief through deep breathing, yoga, mindfulness, or self-massage. Consider challenging some of the negative thoughts you may have. Remember: not all thoughts we have are accurate, and we benefit by substituting more balanced and encouraging ones.

Pursuing professional mental health treatment can be a tremendous advantage in your recovery from depression. Therapy is effective at helping you pinpoint problems that contribute to your depression, understand what you can solve or improve, and identify steps of change. In many cases, significant improvement can be made in 10 to 15 sessions of individual therapy. Working together with your therapist to recognize and change the thought and behavior patterns that are keeping you from feeling your best is the collaborative goal. Group therapy is also highly effective in managing depression and can provide benefits that

individual therapy may not. Other members of the group often help you come up with specific ideas for improving a difficult situation and hold you accountable along your journey. It can be a relief to hear others discuss what they're experiencing and to realize you're not alone.

Depression is an illness best managed by the individual receiving caring support from others. If you know someone who may be struggling with depression, start by listening to them. You don't have to "fix" or instantly provide advice. A conversation can be started by simply stating you are concerned or have noticed some differences in

him or her. Let the individual know he or she is not alone and is important to you. Be compassionate and have realistic expectations for the person with depression. Encourage the individual to seek treatment and offer to join him or her at the first visit.

There is hope since depression is proven to be treatable. Treatment is best when it is individualized, so what works best for one person with depression may not be as effective for you. Consider trying a variety of informal and formal methods of coping and treatment to discover the best recipe for success.

Chris Antczak is a Licensed Professional Counselor with over 10 years of experience in the mental health field. He currently provides outpatient therapy to adults at Penn Foundation. Chris earned his Master's degree in Counseling and Human Services from Lehigh University.

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