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Depression is a mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest. Also called major depressive disorder or clinical depression, it affects how you feel, think and behave and can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems. Depression is a common mental disorder that presents with depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure, decreased energy, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, and poor concentration.

Depression is a significant contributor to the global burden of disease and affects people in all communities across the world. Today, depression is estimated to affect 350 million people. The World Mental Health Survey conducted in 17 countries found that on average about 1 in 20 people reported having an episode of depression in the previous year. Depressive disorders often start at a young age; they reduce people’s functioning and often are recurring. Moreover, depression often comes with symptoms of anxiety.

Depression is a brain disorder that can lead to much emotional anguish. Changes in how your brain functions also can have a big effect on your body. Is it any wonder, then, that depression contributes to a wide array of physical problems that affect everything from your heart to your immune system? Depression doesn't just cause physical symptoms; it can also increase your risk for -- or may worsen -- certain physical illnesses or conditions. In turn, some illnesses can also trigger depression.

Possible causes of depression include a combination of biological, psychological and social sources of distress. Increasingly, research suggests that these factors may cause changes in brain function, including altered activity of certain neural circuits in the brain.

The persistent feeling of sadness or loss of interest that characterises major depression can lead to a range of behavioural and physical symptoms. These may include changes in sleep, appetite, energy level, concentration, daily behaviour or self-esteem. Depression can also be associated with thoughts of suicide.

The mainstay of treatment is usually medication, talk therapy or a combination of the two. Increasingly, research suggests that these treatments may normalise brain changes associated with depression.

Types of depression. Depression comes in many shapes and forms. While defining the severity of depression—whether it’s mild, moderate, or major—can be complicated, knowing what type of depression you have may help you manage your symptoms and get the most effective treatment.

People experience depression in different ways. It may interfere with your daily work, resulting in lost time and lower productivity. It can also influence relationships and some chronic health conditions. Major depression can cause a variety of symptoms. Some affect your mood, and others affect your body.

There are multiple variations of depression that a person can suffer from, with the most general distinction being depression in people who have or do not have a history of manic episodes. Depressive episode involves symptoms such as depressed mood, loss of interest and enjoyment, and increased fatigability. Depending on the number and severity of symptoms, a depressive episode can be categorized as mild, moderate, or severe. An individual with a mild depressive episode will have some difficulty in continuing with ordinary work and social activities, but will probably not cease to function completely. During a severe depressive episode, on the other hand, it is very unlikely that the sufferer will be able to continue with social, work, or domestic activities, except to a very limited extent. • Bipolar affective disorder typically consists of both manic and depressive episodes separated by periods of normal mood. Manic episodes involve elevated mood and increased energy, resulting in over-activity, pressure of speech and decreased need for sleep.

Symptoms may also be ongoing, or come and go.

The symptoms of depression can be experienced differently among men, women, and children differently. Mood: anxiety, apathy, general discontent, guilt, hopelessness, loss of interest, loss of interest or pleasure in activities, mood swings, or sadness

Behavioural: agitation, excessive crying, irritability, restlessness, or social isolation

Sleep: early awakening, excess sleepiness, insomnia, or restless sleep

Whole body: excessive hunger, fatigue, or loss of appetite

Cognitive: lack of concentration, slowness in activity, or thoughts of suicide

Weight: weight gain or weight loss

Also common: poor appetite or rumination

Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. A bleak outlook—nothing will ever get better and there’s nothing you can do to improve your situation. Loss of interest in daily activities. You don’t care anymore about former hobbies, pastimes, social activities, or sex. You’ve lost your ability to feel joy and pleasure. Appetite or weight changes. Significant weight loss or weight gain—a change of more than 5% of body weight in a month. Sleep changes. Either [insomnia](https://www.helpguide.org/articles/sleep/insomnia-causes-and-cures.htm), especially waking in the early hours of the morning, or oversleeping. Anger or irritability. Feeling agitated, restless, or even violent. Your tolerance level is low, your temper short, and everything and everyone gets on your nerves. Loss of energy. Feeling fatigued, sluggish, and physically drained. Your whole body may feel heavy, and even small tasks are exhausting or take longer to complete. Self-loathing. Strong feelings of worthlessness or guilt. You harshly criticize yourself for perceived faults and mistakes. Reckless behavior. You engage in escapist behavior such as substance abuse, [compulsive gambling](https://www.helpguide.org/articles/addictions/gambling-addiction-and-problem-gambling.htm), reckless driving, or dangerous sports. Concentration problems. Trouble focusing, making decisions, or remembering things. Unexplained aches and pains. An increase in physical complaints such as headaches, back pain, aching muscles, and stomach pain.

Most likely, depression is caused by a combination of genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors, according to the NIMH. Certain medical conditions may also trigger depression, including an underactive thyroid gland, cancer, heart disease, prolonged pain and other significant illnesses

Common causes include: Family history. You’re at a higher risk for developing depression if you have a [family history](https://www.healthline.com/health/depression/genetic) of depression or another mood disorder. Early childhood trauma. Some events affect the way your body reacts to fear and stressful situations. Brain structure. There’s a greater risk for depression if the [frontal lobe of your brain](https://www.healthline.com/human-body-maps/frontal-lobe) is less active. However, scientists don’t know if this happens before or after the onset of depressive symptoms. Medical conditions. Certain conditions may put you at higher risk, such as [chronic illness](https://www.healthline.com/health/chronic-illness-self-doubts-overcome), insomnia, chronic pain, or [attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)](https://www.healthline.com/health/adhd/signs). Drug use. A history of drug or alcohol misuse can affect your risk.

Depression can cause a lot of symptoms within the central nervous system, many of which are easy to dismiss or ignore.Older adults may also have difficulty identifying cognitive changes because it’s easy to dismiss the signs of depression as related to “getting older.” According to the [American Psychological Association](https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/aging-depression.aspx), older adults with depression have more difficulties with memory loss and reaction time during everyday activities compared with younger adults with depression.

Learn as much as you can about your depression. It’s important to determine whether your depression symptoms are due to an underlying medical condition. If so, that condition will need to be treated first. The severity of your depression is also a factor. The more severe the depression, the more intensive the treatment you’re likely to need.

It takes time to find the right treatment. It might take some trial and error to find the treatment and support that works best for you. For example, if you decide to pursue therapy it may take a few attempts to find a therapist that you really click with. Or you may try an antidepressant, only to find that you don’t need it if you take a daily half hour walk. Be open to change and a little experimentation.

Don’t rely on medications alone. Although medication can relieve the symptoms of depression, it is not usually suitable for long-term use. Other treatments, including exercise and therapy, can be just as effective as medication, often even more so, but don’t come with unwanted side effects. If you do decide to try medication, remember that medication works best when you make healthy lifestyle changes as well.

Get social support. The more you cultivate your social connections, the more protected you are from depression. If you are feeling stuck, don’t hesitate to talk to trusted family members or friends, or seek out new connections at a depression support group, for example. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness and it won’t mean you’re a burden to others. Often, the simple act of talking to someone face-to-face can be an enormous help.

Treatment takes time and commitment. All of these depression treatments take time, and sometimes it might feel overwhelming or frustratingly slow. That is normal. Recovery usually has its ups and downs.