

YOUR  
HEALTH

# Understanding depression



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Everyone experiences times of sadness in life, such as when they have problems with work, family, illness, or a death of a loved one. However, depression is much more serious than simply being sad for a short time. Depression is an emotional state marked by sadness or loss of pleasure, feelings of worthlessness and guilt, withdrawal from others, and reduced sleep and appetite. It can lead to symptoms such as loss of appetite, loss of energy, or difficulty sleeping. People with depression often isolate themselves from family and friends. They may not have the desire or energy to complete daily activities like going to work or having tea with friends. Common symptoms of depression include extended periods of unexplained crying or sadness. People with depression can also experience intense feelings of irritability, pessimism, hopelessness, worry, anxiety, anger, or rage. They may feel worthless, helpless, or extremely guilty. They may have difficulty with memory or concentration. Depression can also cause people to experience unexplained aches and pains throughout their body. In addition, they may also have thoughts of death or suicide. When these types of depressive symptoms last for two weeks or more, the depression is serious and must not be ignored.

The underlying causes of depression are not well understood, however, there are many research that suggest various systems in the brain that may cause or be affected by depression. For example, major depression is characterized by excessive sleep therefore; it is very likely that the brainstem, which controls sleep, plays a role in depression. Similarly, abnormalities in the cerebral cortex, which controls thinking, probably have something to do with the inability to concentrate and the negative thoughts that can be characteristic of depression. Furthermore, imbalances of chemicals in the brain called neurotransmitters seem to play a key role in depression. Research into the way antidepressant medications function has pro-

vided the greatest insight in this area. For example, certain medications used to treat depression have been shown to increase amounts of neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine, in the brain. This suggests that a chemical imbalance in the brain causes depressive symptoms. Other common factors involved in depression are family history, environmental conditions, trauma and stress, and some medical conditions.

When someone you know has depression, there are things that you can do to help:

- Encourage the person to get treatment from a doctor for the depression.
- Recognize that willpower alone will not make the depression go away.
- Permit the person to talk about his or her feelings, if the person wishes to.
- Let the person know that you are available to offer support and assistance.
- Encourage the person to get additional support from friends and family members.
- Encourage the person to use his or her religion or spirituality to help with coping.
- Assist the person in recognizing the onset of symptoms of depression.
- Encourage the person to remain as physically and socially active as possible.
- Suggest that the person avoid making major decisions while he or she is depressed.
- Help the person adhere to normal activities and daily routines.
- Remind the person to complete activities of daily living that may be overlooked.

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