

Health Bulletin:

Depression Can Be Treated



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#7 in a series of Health Bulletins on issues of pressing interest to all New Yorkers

While depression can be devastating at any age, most people can be helped with medication and therapy.



- Everyone has ups and downs or occasionally gets the blues, but feeling down for an extended time (every day for at least 2 weeks, or most days for a longer period) may be a sign of depressive illness.
- Untreated depression can devastate family relationships, friendships, and the ability to go to school or hold a job.
- Depression can be treated. Medication and therapy, alone or in combination, can help most people.

What Is Depression?

- Depression is an illness that affects physical, mental, and emotional well-being.
 - Depression affects basic, everyday activities like eating and sleeping.
 - It also affects how people think about things and feel about themselves.
- Depression is *not* a personal weakness or a passing “bad mood.”
 - People with depressive illness cannot just “pull themselves together” and “get over it.”
 - Depression often takes on a life of its own – without treatment, symptoms can last months or even years.
- There are several types of depressive disorders, but all depressed people exhibit at least some of these symptoms:
 - Persistent sad, anxious, or “empty” mood.
 - Problems sleeping (insomnia or oversleeping).
 - Increases or decreases in appetite or weight.
 - Constant worry.
 - Feelings of pessimism and hopelessness.
 - Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness.
 - Loss of interest or pleasure in once-enjoyable activities (including sex).
 - Fatigue, decreased energy, feeling “slowed down.”
 - Restlessness and irritability.
 - Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions.
 - Physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment (such as headaches, gastrointestinal problems, difficulty breathing, or chronic pain).
 - Suicide attempts, or thoughts of death or suicide.

Who Is at Risk for Depression?

- Anyone is potentially at risk for a depressive illness.
- Women report depression about twice as often as men, but are not necessarily at greater risk. Women may be more likely to discuss depression or to seek help.
- Depression can occur at any age.
 - Depression among older people (age 65+) is often not properly diagnosed or treated.
 - Depression in this age group is often masked by physical complaints and sleep or appetite disturbances.
 - Medical problems are a particular stressor.
 - Children can experience different symptoms, including irritability, emotional withdrawal, and behavioral or academic problems.

What Causes Depression?

- Although the cause is still not well understood, depression is manifested by an imbalance in brain chemicals that help control mood.
- Health problems, serious personal losses, abusive relationships, financial difficulties, and other problems can trigger or worsen depression.
- Alcohol and drug use can trigger, aggravate, and prevent recovery from depression.
 - People with depressive disorders often drink or use drugs. These substances almost always make depression worse.
 - Drugs and alcohol can cause adverse reactions with medications used to treat depression.

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Treating Depression

- Depression is a common illness that is often misunderstood and often inadequately treated.
- If depression is suspected, a medical examination can identify or rule out physical causes before a mental health assessment is done.
- Treatment will depend on the outcome of both medical and mental health evaluation.
 - Treatment may include medication, psychotherapy, or both.
 - People with moderate-to-severe depression often benefit greatly from medication.
- Many safe and effective medications are available to treat depression.
 - Different medications and dosages may need to be tried, sometimes in combination.
 - Medications generally take 4 to 8 weeks to be fully effective.
 - Even when a person with depression starts to feel better, it is important to continue medications. Relapse is possible without adequate duration of treatment.
 - Some medications must be stopped gradually. Always consult a doctor before changing, reducing, or stopping a drug regimen.
- Psychotherapy can help depressed people to:
 - Change negative thinking and behavior patterns;
 - Deal with people and situations better; and/or
 - Resolve psychological conflicts that may contribute to depression.
- Physical activity can improve mood, help manage stress, and relieve mild-to-moderate depression.

How to Help if Someone Is Depressed

- Help get appropriate diagnosis and treatment.
- Encourage the person to stay with treatment until symptoms ease, or to seek a change in treatment if there is no improvement after several weeks.
 - Help ensure that all medications are taken as directed.
 - Encourage the person to avoid alcohol and other drugs while on medication or under treatment.
- People with depression need emotional support, patience, and encouragement.
 - Do not belittle negative feelings, but do point out realities and offer hope.
 - Do not accuse the person of faking illness or being lazy.
 - Do include the person in outings and activities, but don't push too hard if an invitation is refused.
- *Do not ignore remarks about suicide.*
 - Inform the patient's physician or counselor if remarks about suicide persist or seem serious.
 - Call 911 if the person is in immediate danger of an actual suicide attempt.
- Living with a depressed person can be extremely difficult. Self-help groups can provide a supportive environment for individuals with depression, as well as for their family and friends.

More Information

- LIFENET (help with depression, other emotional problems, and alcohol and substance abuse): Call 1-800-LIFENET (1-800-543-3638), or call 311 and ask for LIFENET
- National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov or 1-866-615-6464
- National Mental Health Association: www.nmha.org or 1-800-969-6642
- National Foundation for Depressive Illness: www.depression.org or 1-800-239-1265

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Health & Mental Hygiene News

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