

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

Sadness or downswings in mood are normal reactions to life's struggles, setbacks, and disappointments. Many people use the word "depression" to explain these kinds of feelings, but depression is much more than just sadness.

Whatever the symptoms, depression is different from normal sadness in that it engulfs your day-to-day life, interfering with your ability to work, study, eat, sleep, and have fun. The feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and worthlessness are intense and unrelenting, with little, if any, relief.

Depression varies from person to person, but there are some common signs and symptoms. It's important to remember that these symptoms can be part of life's normal lows. But the more symptoms you have, the stronger they are, and the longer they've lasted—the more likely it is that you're dealing with depression. When these symptoms are overwhelming and disabling, that's when it's time to seek help.

Signs and symptoms of depression include:

- **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.** No interest in 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, especially waking in the early hours of the morning, or oversleeping (also known as hypersomnia).
- **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, 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.

Depression causes and risk factors

Some illnesses have a specific medical cause, making treatment straightforward. If you have diabetes, you take insulin. If you have appendicitis, you have surgery. Depression, however, is more complicated. Depression is not just the result of a chemical imbalance in the brain, and it's not simply cured with medication. **Experts believe that depression is caused by a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors.** In other words, your lifestyle choices, relationships, and coping skills matter just as much—if not more so—than genetics. However, certain risk factors make you more vulnerable to depression.

Causes and risk factors for depression

- Loneliness
- Lack of social support
- Recent stressful life experiences
- Family history of depression
- Marital or relationship problems
- Financial strain
- Early childhood trauma or abuse
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Unemployment or underemployment
- Health problems or chronic pain

The cause of your depression helps determine the treatment

Understanding the underlying cause of your depression may help you overcome the problem. For example, if you are depressed because of a dead end job, the best treatment might be finding a more satisfying career, not taking an antidepressant. If you are new to an area and feeling lonely and sad, finding new friends at work or through a hobby will probably give you more of a mood boost than going to therapy. In such cases, the depression is remedied by changing the situation.

----- DEPRESSION AND SUICIDE RISK -----

Depression is a major risk factor for suicide. The deep despair and hopelessness that goes along with depression can make suicide feel like the only way to escape the pain. If you have a loved one with depression, take any suicidal talk or behavior seriously and learn to recognize the warning signs.

Warning signs of suicide include:

- Talking about killing or harming one's self
- Expressing strong feelings of hopelessness or being trapped
- An unusual preoccupation with death or dying
- Acting recklessly, as if they have a death wish (e.g. speeding through red lights)
- Calling or visiting people to say goodbye
- Getting affairs in order (giving away prized possessions, tying up loose ends)
- Saying things like "Everyone would be better off without me" or "I want out"
- A sudden switch from being extremely depressed to acting calm and happy

If You Are Feeling Suicidal...

When you're feeling extremely depressed or suicidal, your problems don't seem temporary—they seem overwhelming and permanent. But with time, you will feel better, especially if you reach out for help. If you are feeling suicidal, know that there are many people who want to support you during this difficult time, so please reach out for help!

Read [Suicide Help](#) or call **1-800-273-TALK** in the U.S. or [Suicide.org](#) to find a helpline in your country.

If Someone You Love is Suicidal...

If you think a friend or family member is considering suicide, express your concern and seek professional help immediately. Talking openly about suicidal thoughts and feelings can save a life!