

What is depression?

The word 'depression' is often used to describe the feelings of sadness which all of us experience at some stage of our lives. It is also a term used to describe a form of mental illness called clinical depression. Because depression is so common, it is important to understand the difference between normal unhappiness and the symptoms of clinical depression.

Normal Unhappiness: When faced with stress, such as the loss of a loved one, relationship breakdown, or great disappointment or frustration, most people will feel unhappy or sad. These emotional reactions are appropriate to the situation, are a part of everyday life and will usually last only a limited time.

"Clinical Depression" is the term used for a group of illnesses characterized by excessive or long-term depressed mood, which affects the person's life. Clinical depression is often accompanied by feelings of anxiety.

Whatever the symptoms and causes of depression, treatment is usually very effective.

What are the main types of depressive illness?

Adjustment disorder with depressed mood

People with this illness are reacting to distressing situations in their lives (e.g. failure of a close relationship or loss of job), but to a greater degree than is usual. This depression is more intense than the unhappiness experienced in daily life: it lasts longer and symptoms often include anxiety, poor sleep and loss of appetite.

The time this form of depression lasts may vary from weeks to years. It usually goes away when the cause is removed, or when the person finds a new way to cope with the stress. Many people require professional help and treatment to overcome this type of depression.

Post-natal depression

The so-called baby blues affect about half of all new mothers. They feel mildly depressed, anxious, tense or unwell, and may have difficulty sleeping even though they are tired and lethargic most of the time.

In about 10 percent of mothers, this feeling of sadness develops into a serious disorder known as post-natal depression. Mothers with this illness find it increasingly difficult to cope with the demands of everyday life. They can experience anxiety, fear, despondency and sadness. Some have panic attacks or become tense and irritable. Some may experience changes in appetite and sleep patterns.

A severe, but rare form of post-natal depression is called puerperal psychosis. The woman suffering from this is unable to cope with everyday life and can be disturbed in her thinking and behaviour.

Depressive episode

This is, in general, a more severe form of clinical depression. It can come on without apparent reason, although, in some cases, a distressing event might trigger the condition. The cause is not well understood, but it is believed to be associated with a chemical imbalance in the central parts of the brain.

A depressive episode can develop in people who have previously coped well with life, who are good at their work and happy in family and social relationships. They can become low-spirited, lose their enjoyment of life and suffer disturbed sleep. They may also lose their appetite, lack concentration and energy, and lose weight. Feelings of guilt are also common. Sometimes their feelings of hopelessness and despair can lead to thoughts of suicide.

The most serious form of this type of depression is called psychotic depression. During this illness, the person loses touch with reality, may stop eating and drinking and may hear voices saying they are wicked or worthless. Others develop false beliefs (delusions) that they have committed bad deeds in the past and deserve to be punished, or that they have a terminal illness, such as cancer, despite there being no medical evidence.

Depressive episodes and psychotic depression are serious and painful illnesses with real risk to the person's life and well-being. Professional assessment and treatment is always necessary, and in some cases, hospitalization may be initially required.

Bipolar mood disorder (previously called manic depression)

A person with bipolar mood disorder experiences depressive episodes alternating with periods of mania involving extreme happiness, over-activity, rapid speech, a total lack of inhibition and, in more serious instances, delusions of grandeur.

What treatment is available?

People experiencing feelings of sadness which have persisted for a long time, or which are affecting their lives to a great extent, should contact their family doctor or community health centre.

Modern treatments for depression can help a person return to more normal feelings and enjoyment of life. Treatment depends on the individual's symptoms, but will take one or more of the following forms:

- Psychological interventions to help individuals understand their thoughts, behaviours and interpersonal relationships.
- General supportive counselling assists people to sort out practical problems and conflicts and helps them understand the reasons for their depression.
- Anti-depressant medications to relieve depressed feelings, restore normal sleep patterns and appetite and reduce anxiety. Unlike tranquilisers, anti-depressant medications are not addictive. They slowly return the balance of neurotransmitters in the brain, taking 1-4 weeks to achieve their positive effects.

What can cause depression?

Many interrelated factors are often associated with depression:

Personality. Depression occurs more commonly in people who are sensitive or emotional and prone to experience feelings that are upsetting to them.

Perfectionists who set high standards for themselves and others, who find it difficult to adjust their ideas to changing circumstances, are often easily depressed.

Also, those who are very dependent on others are susceptible to depression if they are let down.

Learned Response. In some cases, people exposed to repeated losses and stress throughout their lives lose their optimism and feel helpless and depressed.

Heredity. It is well established that the tendency to develop depression runs in families. This is similar to a predisposition to other illnesses, such as heart disease and high blood pressure.

Biochemical imbalance. As already stated, depressive episodes are thought to be due, in part, to a chemical imbalance in the brain. This can be corrected with anti-depressant medication.

Stress. Depression is associated with stress after personal tragedies or disasters. It is more common at certain stages of life, such as at childbirth, menopause and retirement, and is common in young adults, women and people with physical health problems.

NOTE: *It is important to understand that depression is not caused by a lack of faith. Neither is it a sign of weakness. Many faithful ones among God's people have experienced depression - we only have to recall Job, Hannah, Elijah and David. For some believers, depression takes over and God seems far away.*

David voices their cry:

"Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.

I sink in miry depths, where there is no foothold.

I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me.

I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched.

My eyes fail, looking for my God." *Psalm 69:1-3.*

Other believers find their faith in God is a strength during their depression.

"Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer.

From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint.

Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

For you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the foe.

I long to dwell in your tent forever and take refuge in the shelter of your wings." *Psalm 61:1-4.*

We do well to remember that everyone suffering depression can benefit from the understanding concern and love of caring friends and from company and inclusion in social interaction.

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DEPRESSION

Depression
"It's OK
to talk about it"

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