

Facts about Major Depression

What Is Major Depression?

Major depression (and the slightly less severe illness of *Dysthymic Disorder*) is a psychiatric disorder characterized by significant periods of time in which the person experiences a sad, "blue," or low mood. This depressed mood is often accompanied by other unpleasant changes, such as loss of appetite or trouble sleeping. In contrast to the normal "blues" that many people often experience, these problems are severe enough to interfere with day-to-day functioning, such as the ability to work, fulfill household responsibilities, and maintain interpersonal relationships.

The experience of depression varies considerably from one individual to the next. Some people describe depression as a loss in energy and interest in the world and a decreased ability to enjoy life. For others, depression is a unique, awful feeling of dread that is difficult to describe to someone who has not had the experience. Living with a person with depression can be difficult because the person may be difficult to engage and some of the depressed feelings may "rub off" on the other person. However, individuals with major depression who work toward recovery from the illness may learn different strategies that can help minimize the impact of the depressive symptoms on their lives.

How Common Is Major Depression?

Major depression is one of the most common psychiatric disorders. Between fifteen and twenty out of every one hundred people (15-20 percent) experience an episode of major depression some time during their life.

How Is the Disorder Diagnosed?

Depression can only be diagnosed with a clinical interview. The purpose of this interview is to determine whether the client has experienced specific "symptoms" of the disorder for a sufficiently long period of time. For a person to be diagnosed with *major depression*, severe symptoms must be present for a least a two-week period, although in most cases symptoms have been present for a longer period. If the symptoms are less severe but are present for long periods of time, the person has the diagnosis of *dysthymic disorder*.

In addition to conducting the interview, the diagnostician must make sure that other physical problems are not present that could produce symptoms similar to those found in depression, such as a brain tumor, a thyroid problem, or alcohol or drug abuse. Depression cannot be diagnosed with a blood test, an X ray, a CAT scan, or any other laboratory test.

The Characteristic Symptoms of Depression

The major symptoms of depression reflect both low mood and other disturbances in appetite, body weight, sleep, and activity level. Not all symptoms must be present for the person to be diagnosed with depression.

Depressed Mood. Mood is low most of the time, according to the individual or significant others.

Diminished Interest or Pleasure. The person has few interests and gets little pleasure from anything, including activities previously found enjoyable.

Change in Appetite and/or Weight. Loss of appetite (and weight), when not dieting, or increased appetite (and weight gain) are evident.

Change in Sleep Pattern. The individual may have difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, or may wake early in the morning and not be able to get back to sleep. Alternately, the person may sleep excessively (such as over twelve hours per night), spending much of the day in bed.

Change in Activity Level. Decreased activity level is reflected by slowness and lethargy, in terms of both individual's behavior and his or her thought processes. Alternatively, the person may feel agitated, "on edge," and restless.

Fatigue or Loss of Energy. The individual experiences fatigue throughout the day, or there is a chronic feeling of loss of energy.

Feelings of Worthlessness, Hopelessness, Helplessness. Individuals may feel they are worthless as people, that there is no hope for improving their lives, or that they are helpless to improve their unhappy situation.

Inappropriate Guilt. Feelings of guilt may be present about events that the person did not even cause, such as a catastrophe, a crime, or an illness.

Recurrent Thoughts about Death. The individual thinks about death a great deal and may contemplate (or even attempt) suicide.

Decreased Concentration or Ability to Make Decisions. Significant decreases in the ability to concentrate make it difficult for the person to pay attention to others or complete rudimentary tasks. The individual may be quite indecisive about even minor things.

Other Symptoms

People with depression (primarily major depression) also may have other psychiatric symptoms at the same time that they experience depressive symptoms. Some of the most common other symptoms include

hallucinations (false perceptions, such as hearing voices) and *delusions* (false beliefs, such as paranoid delusions). These symptoms disappear when the symptoms of depression have been controlled.

How Is Major Depression Distinguished from Other Disorders?

Persons with major depression suffer episodes of depression interspersed with periods of normal mood. If the individual experiences both depression and the elevated, hyper energized, expansive moods defined as mania, the individual is then diagnosed as having bipolar disorder (manic-depression). If the person experiences the psychotic symptoms discussed about when not depressed, he or she is typically given a diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder.

What Is the Course of Major Depression?

Major depression can develop at any time during adult life, starting during adolescence and extending up until old age. Some individuals experience significant bouts of depression, ranging from weeks to months or even years, but fully recover from the disorder. For other individuals, however, depression is a lifelong disorder, with symptoms varying over time in severity. Many famous people have struggled with depression (such as Abraham Lincoln), but have been able to make significant contributions to society.

What Causes Depression?

No one knows the cause of depression, although many theories have been proposed. Many scientists believe that there is more than one cause of depression. Biochemical theories suggest that the disorder may be caused by an imbalance in chemicals in the brain, particularly the chemicals *norepinephrine* and *serotonin*. This imbalance may be determined partly by genetic factors and partly by early effects of the environment. There is evidence that the loss of a significant person early in life (such as a parent) increases an individual's vulnerability to develop depression at a later age.

Are There Factors That Might Increase the Likelihood of Relapse?

For many people, depression is recurrent. Factors that tend to increase the likelihood of a recurrence include a life change or a loss, a seasonal change (especially the coming of winter), and excessive alcohol use.

How Is Depression Treated?

There are many effective treatments for depression. Medication is very helpful for some individuals. Medications can reduce or eliminate the symptoms of depression and prevent relapses from occurring. Antidepressant medications are the most effective medications for depression, although some clients also benefit from antipsychotic

medications. Some individuals with severe major depression that doesn't respond to other treatments may benefit from electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), also referred to as "shock treatment."

Individual psychotherapy is quite effective in improving the symptoms of depression. The focus of therapy is usually on correcting common problems with thinking (such as a tendency to think in "black-and-white" terms), improving social skills and problem solving, or improving interpersonal relationships. Family or marital therapy can reduce stress in the family and teach the family how to monitor the disorder.

While there are many effective treatments for depression, it must also be noted that this tends to be an episodic disorder, and relapses often occur. In addition, a small subset of individuals with depression continues to suffer significant symptoms, in spite of the best pharmacologic and psychotherapeutic treatment.

Summary

1. Depression is a common illness that affects more than 1 out of 5 people at some point in their lives.
2. Depression tends to be episodic.
3. Common causes of depression are related to brain chemistry, loss, and stress.
4. Medications and therapy can help treat depression.

Consult a mental health professional (such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, or psychiatric nurse) about any questions you have concerning this handout.