



Out of the Blue



UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO DEPRESSION

If you are struggling with serious depression, you're not alone. About 50 million Americans—or one out of every five—become seriously depressed at some time in their lives. Depression can affect anyone of any age at any time. There's good news too: Depression responds very well to treatment, and usually does so in a fairly short time.



Although serious depression challenges one-fifth of our population, nearly every one occasionally struggles with “feeling blue,” or being “down in the dumps” or “in a bad mood.” These are common reactions to the inevitable hardships of life. However, if the sadness continues for some time or intensifies, you may be experiencing more than moderate feelings of being “down” or sad. You may have the condition mental health professionals call depression or clinical depression.

Since depression—whether mild or severe—is so common and since it responds well to both self-help strategies and professional care, it's important that you know how to recognize the signs of

depression in yourself and others. This is an important first step in enabling you and those you care about to overcome depression and lead healthier, happier lives.

Remember, even in its most serious forms, depression is very treatable. Among those seeking professional help, the improvement rate is high. For the majority of depressed persons, counseling, medication or a combination of both can bring relief, significant improvement, and often full recovery.

UNMASKING DEPRESSION

Many seriously depressed individuals appear fine to most people with whom they associate. In fact,

occasionally they hide their feelings so well that even their close friends and family members do not recognize the problem.

Depression is an emotional state of feeling sad, lonely and dejected, usually accompanied by negative thinking, and often involving physical symptoms such as fatigue and headaches. If one does not accept and deal with depression, it can be dangerous: A small percentage of seriously depressed people eventually commit suicide. Many depressed individuals need professional counseling to work through feelings of despondency and resolve immediate problems as well as deeper issues.

It is absolutely *not* true that only weak people battle with serious depression. In fact, depression often strikes some of the most intelligent, capable and creative individuals: Abraham Lincoln, Joan Rivers, Winston Churchill, Vincent van Gogh, and Emily Dickinson to name a few.

It doesn't help much to blame yourself for being depressed. You may be no more at fault than if you had asthma or diabetes. Also avoid blaming other people and circumstances. Assigning blame is of limited value; learning and healing and getting on with life are what's really important.

Two percent of all children and five percent of all adolescents suffer from depression. A man has about a 10 percent chance of experiencing depression in his life while a woman has about a 23 percent chance. This is probably related to the societal roles and expectations of males versus females. People over 65 are four times more likely to succumb to depression than the rest of the population—a fact associated with the many age-related losses and our society's frequent failure in teaching us how to adapt to loss.

SIGNS OF DEPRESSION

- ◆ Feelings of sadness, disappointment, hopelessness, worthlessness, or loneliness.
- ◆ Withdrawal from people and activities.
- ◆ Loss of pleasure and enjoyment of life.
- ◆ Physical problems like aches, pains, fatigue, digestive problems, sleep disturbance, weight gain or loss, and decreased sexual interest.

- ◆ Crying spells or lack of emotional expression.
- ◆ Frequent sense of guilt, self-blame, or failure.
- ◆ Gloomy thoughts about the future.
- ◆ Low self-esteem.
- ◆ Concentration problems; poor memory.
- ◆ Appearance: Sad face, dejected movements, unkempt look.
- ◆ Negative thoughts: "I'm a failure!" "I'm no good!" "No one cares about me."



- ◆ People problems: "I don't want anybody to see me." "I feel so lonely."
- ◆ Suicidal thoughts or wishes: "I'd be better off dead!" "I wonder if it hurts to die?"
- ◆ Reduced activity: "I just sit around and mope." "Doing anything is too much of an effort."
- ◆ Unfocused activity: Staying occupied with meaningless busywork as a way of avoiding core issues and the pain associated with them.
- ◆ Frenzied activity: Constantly on the go, nonstop partying, racing thoughts, reckless activities (symptoms of manic depression).

Some of these same symptoms can accompany an illness or infection. If you suspect physical illness, see a nurse, physician, or other health care professional. If you have a number of these symptoms and they last for days, weeks, or months at a time, and they are recurring, you may well be suffering from clinical depression.

TYPES OF DEPRESSION

There are three major categories of clinical depression: psychological depressions, biological depressions, and a mixed type of depression. Psychological depressions are emotional reactions to losses and disappointments. Medical illnesses or other imbalances of body or brain chemistry cause biological depressions. Mixed types of depression are a combination of the first two. A biological imbalance may be present, but depression does not occur until it is triggered by an external stressor such as the loss of a job.

Within these major categories are other sub-types of depression recognized by their distinct symptoms:

■ **Major Depression** begins suddenly, possibly triggered by a life-changing event. It is so severe that it interferes with daily routine and functioning. It can continue for months or even years if left untreated. Major depression may occur only once or twice and then subside, but without treatment, the depression may appear again and become more severe with each occurrence.

■ **Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)** seems to be triggered by the reduction of daylight hours in the late fall and winter. Exposure to light sources such as full-spectrum fluorescent tubes often provides some relief.

■ **Manic Depressive Disorder** or bipolar disorder is characterized by mood swings between mania (an extreme high) and major depression (feeling very low). The mood changes can occur suddenly or over a longer period of time. Symptoms of mania include insomnia, overconfidence, racing thoughts, excess of unbalanced energy, and wild behavior.

■ **Dysthymic Disorder** brings less extreme feelings of depression, but it is still clinical depression in that it significantly affects one's daily mood. People with this type of depression feel "down" or "blue" most of the time. Daily functioning can still be maintained, but over time work and relationships with family and close friends generally suffer. Dysthymia can be successfully treated in almost every case.

CAUSES OF DEPRESSION

Although depression can occur for no apparent reason, usually one or more factors such as the following are involved: major life changes, stress, personality inclinations, shortages or imbalances of certain key chemicals in the brain, family history, substance abuse, illness, or the side effects of certain medications.

DEPRESSION DIFFERS FROM GRIEF

Both depressed and grieving people may experience pervasive sadness, tearfulness, withdrawal, fatigue, sleep problems, and changes in appetite and weight. However, a person grieving a major loss such as the death of a loved one usually does not feel like a failure and self-esteem generally stays intact. He or she cries for an identifiable loss, and the crying usually brings relief. A person in grief can more easily laugh and is more likely to accept support. Grief is a natural healing process through which the feelings of sadness and loss typically lessen over time. Every now and then, particularly when the grief process is blocked or complicated, it can evolve into clinical depression.

DEPRESSION IS A FAMILY AFFAIR

What affects one family member usually, in one way or another, affects the entire family. Not only does a person's depression influence other family members, but the dynamics of the family may contribute to depression in one or more of its members.



Because of this, family therapy is often helpful in the resolution of depression. Among family members a non-judgmental attitude of “we care and we want to help” facilitates recovery. That is not to say that everyone should swarm to the depressed person and wait on her hand and foot. Trying to help too much can have an undesirable effect.

Show acceptance of the person’s feelings and be supportive, but avoid hidden criticisms like “You shouldn’t feel so upset” or “You should be over this by now.” A depressed person doesn’t need judgment or criticism; she needs your acceptance, understanding, warmth and encouragement. And she needs you to be patient and to believe in her.

If the behavior patterns of the family are significantly feeding the depression, altered family functioning may be the only way to permanently extinguish the problem. Family therapists can assist with techniques and skills to “weed out” harmful patterns in family relationships. Those who conquer depression often report that supportive family members, including spouses, played a key role in their recovery.

TIPS FOR HELPING A DEPRESSED FRIEND OR LOVED ONE

- ♥ Don’t moralize or pressure your friend to “put a smile on his face.” Often he will feel worse after hearing such statements.
- ♥ Be available. Tell your friend how much you care. Then listen well. But don’t try to be a therapist for your friend, even if you are professionally trained.
- ♥ Urge your friend to get professional help if necessary. Offer to go along with him if doing so will make it easier.

SUGGESTIONS FOR OVERCOMING DEPRESSION

Since your thoughts and actions often play a major role in depression, there are many things you can do that may help free you of depression:

- ♥ Allow yourself to experience your feelings. If you need to cry, do so. If you are angry, share with an understanding friend or find another healthy

way to express your anger. Writing in a personal journal is a good way to experience your feelings and thoughts rather than keeping them inside.

- ♥ If your health allows, walk, jog, run, bike, swim, or play tennis with a friend. Move your body.
- ♥ Get busy doing things you enjoy, like flying a kite, lending a hand to a neighbor, going out to eat with a co-worker, or taking in a movie.
- ♥ List the ways you belittle yourself; notice how this harms you; then put a big X through your list and decide to treat yourself more kindly.
- ♥ List your talents, special characteristics and successes. Think about each of these strengths. Frequently review and add to your list, taking time to appreciate each item.
- ♥ Answer these questions. Do I really want to change? What benefits do I get for being depressed? What does it do for me? What payoffs would I get if I let go of my depression? If I were not depressed, what would I be doing?
- ♥ Take time to thoroughly ponder these important questions: Does this depression have a message for me? Is there something I need to be doing more of or less of? Are there small lifestyle changes I want to make? Are my mind and body and spirit calling out for me to make a major change in my life? Talk about your answers with a good friend.
- ♥ Adopt realistic expectations, accepting that life is filled with challenges. See life’s difficulties as opportunities for learning and growing.
- ♥ Make a “stroke” file. It is almost certain that at some time in your life people said they liked something about you. Jot down that positive stroke on a scrap of paper, and put it in a box or file. Include any letters or cards from people who let you know they appreciate you. Add to your collection any time. When you feel down, look in your stroke file, and let yourself enjoy the compliments you have received.
- ♥ Be extra caring and kind to yourself. For example, take a soothing, warm bath while listening to some favorite music. Enjoy a leisurely walk. Lie down under a tree and experience your oneness with nature. Ask a friend for a back rub or massage. What other special things could you do for yourself?

NURTURE HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Feelings of being alone in the world are prominent in depression. Being free of depression requires support from family and friends. If you want to leave depression behind in your life, nurture significant relationships with friends and family. List the most important people in your life. With these people in mind, work on enriching your relationships with them. Listening to another's feelings and goals can help put life in perspective and ease your feelings of sadness. Helping others is a good way to lift your own spirits.

USE POSITIVE SELF-TALK

What you tell yourself has a profound influence on the way you feel and what you do. Give yourself a break: Clear away negative ways of looking at things. Instead of saying to yourself, "Nothing is going right," "Nobody cares," or "I'm messing everything up," discipline yourself to think more positive thoughts: "I have so much to be grateful for." Or "Hey, that's no big deal; I'm just going to smile and keep right on going." Or "I am lovable, brave and strong." Or "Wow, that will be fun!"

When you start choosing more positive thoughts, stay with it. It usually takes a while before your emotions and body catch up with your new way of thinking. So don't give up, and remember that it's important not just to say positive things to yourself, you must *believe* what you're saying to yourself.

MORE HINTS FOR WINNING THE DEPRESSION BATTLE

- ♥ Get enough sleep and relaxation.
- ♥ Eat balanced, nutritious meals.
- ♥ Count your blessings, and express gratitude to others for the positives they bring into your life.
- ♥ If you are spiritually oriented, seek comfort and guidance in prayer, worship or meditation.
- ♥ Feed your spirit in other ways you enjoy, such as singing, dancing, deep breathing, yoga, gardening, painting, or adding touches of beauty to your daily environment.
- ♥ Make a short "To Do" list of activities you value and want to complete today; get started now.

- ♥ If your life is too busy, look for ways to cut back, do less, and simplify.
- ♥ Find a quiet place in which you can relax. Then take some deep breaths and visualize yourself feeling and acting the way you would ideally like.
- ♥ Ask for healthy hugs, and give a bunch of them away too.
- ♥ Reach out to others. Join a civic organization. Drop in on someone who is lonely. Give away a dozen friendly smiles.

REACHING OUT FOR PROFESSIONAL HELP

Depression can be treated by a range of therapies. Self-help strategies and support groups also can be effective. Frequently clinical depression involves biochemical imbalances in the body that are best treated with specific antidepressant medications. When required, medication is very helpful in controlling symptoms, while counseling addresses underlying, core issues. In most cases, when medication is not accompanied by counseling, the relapse rate is higher.



If you or a loved one has been depressed for a long time or experiences severe mood swings, seek assistance from a qualified mental health professional. The earlier you seek treatment, the better, although it's never too late. When in doubt, reach out.

Choosing to seek help with depression does not mean that you are crazy or that something is wrong with you. It doesn't mean that you can't handle your own problems. It's just smart. Getting help when it's needed is a sign of strength and intelligence, not weakness. Successful people know when to seek expert advice.

Seek quality professional help if you . . .

- ◆ are thinking about suicide.
- ◆ have practiced the suggestions described in this publication and still feel depressed.
- ◆ are too depressed to try self-help techniques.
- ◆ are experiencing severe mood swings.
- ◆ think your depression is related to other problems that require professional help.
- ◆ think talking with someone might help.

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

- ◆ Mental health or comprehensive care center
- ◆ Family service agency
- ◆ Minister, priest, rabbi or other spiritual leader, if he or she has been trained in mental health counseling.
- ◆ Ask people you trust (your physician, a respected friend, etc.) to recommend a good therapist.
- ◆ Look in the yellow pages of your phone book for qualified mental health professionals such as psychiatrists, psychologists, and family therapists, and licensed or certified counselors.

CHOOSING A THERAPIST

In choosing a counselor don't hesitate to ask questions and do some shopping around. Look for a therapist you feel good about whose skills are well-suited to your needs. Often this can be done with a few phone calls. Know that counseling and the insight and behavior change that come from it can be very positive and growth producing.

ENJOY!

Depression is incompatible with joy. So if you are able to do so, open up to the wonder and joy that so often surrounds you. You may have to push yourself in the beginning, but it will get easier.



Smile. Laugh. Have fun. Let the wonderful little child in you come out and play! Make a silly face, blow bubbles, throw a paper wad to a friend. Smell a flower and gently brush it against your face. Go down a sliding board, swing under the moonlight, hug a tree, play in the sand, or skip pebbles over the water.

Consider the wisdom of the *Talmud*: "A person will be called to account on Judgment Day for every permissible thing he or she might have enjoyed but did not." Or as Christian leader Dorothy Day put it: "How necessary it is to cultivate a spirit of joy. . . . We are called to the duty of delight."



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A **Leader's Guide** accompanies this leaflet.

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