

Depression is alarmingly common. At any given time 1 in 20 Americans will be suffering from depression. Also, 1 in 10 Americans will have suffered a depression at some point in their lives.

### **What is depression?**

Depression is actually an umbrella diagnosis. This means that there are many different types of depression with many different causes. Some depressions lift spontaneously after a short period of time and some have a more chronic course. Different individuals will manifest different symptom patterns.

Clinical depression is not the same thing as the sadness or pain one might feel after a loss such as a divorce or the death of a loved one. Grief is a natural process that must occur after experiencing a loss. The pain of loss is part and parcel of having loved and the pain actually brings about healing and closure. Also, a bad day is not a depression. We all have bad days. However, when the bad days far outnumber the good days, then depression may be the issue.

### **So then, how do we recognize clinical depression?**

Clinical depression is diagnosed through patterns of symptoms.

We look at **mood**, which is another way of saying feeling state or enduring feelings. Mood is like the climate—an enduring state which changes periodically but within certain parameters. Feelings are like weather—somewhat unpredictable and transient.

We look for what are called **vegetative symptoms**, a fancy way of describing physical functioning.

We look at the person's **cognitive functioning**—how is concentration? Memory? Is there a persistent pattern with respect to the type of thoughts the person is having?

We also look at what is occurring in the person's **relationships**. What kind of relationships does this person have? How are the person's current relationships changing?

Finally, we look at the outside or **behavior**. How is the person presenting herself in the world? What is she communicating with her body language and her dress?

The mood accompanying depression is one of its most distinguishing features. And usually we associate depression with a dark, despairing mood. Often a depressed person will find herself crying quite often and not really knowing why or focusing on particularly painful times.

**Despair** is that feeling of incredible despondency, or impending doom. It leads to the thought that things are terrible and there is just no chance of them changing. This thought further fuels feelings of despair.

**Helplessness and hopelessness** are characteristic of depressive moods. Helplessness is the mood of “Nothing I ever do or can do will make things right.” Hopelessness is that feeling that nothing will ever get better.

Depression is often accompanied by **persistent sadness and emptiness**. Objectively, one might have a very comfortable and adequate life but yet something feels amiss. It feels like there has been a loss when there may be no recent or tangible loss. Life just does not feel fulfilling.

Depression is also accompanied, at times, by **irritability**. When depressed, one might become sharp or even downright nasty in a situation that would not have been bothersome in the past. Excessive feelings of guilt and worry also might persist.

Depression is a real illness and its symptoms include real physical manifestations. Usually, energy is diminished. There is often a feeling of **fatigue**, of going in slow motion. Usually some kind of **sleep disturbance** occurs. Sometimes it is a form of insomnia—difficulty staying asleep or early morning awakening. Sometimes the opposite occurs.

Eating patterns are often affected by depression. Some people lose their appetite for food and forget to eat. As a result they lose weight. Some people treat their despair with food in order to try to find some pleasure in life or to stuff their feelings.

The sex drive is affected by depression. Most likely depression will be accompanied by a **loss in sexual desire**.

Depression might also be the underlying cause of body aches and pains that seem to have no known etiology. Sometimes it is easier for us to own and acknowledge physical pain than psychic pain.

One of the hidden but more profound symptoms of depression is its effect on cognition. **Depression changes the way you think**. Depression causes a diminishment in the ability to concentrate. It is harder to get through a book, or keep your mind on the job. It is almost as if depression weaves cotton into the brain that makes it hard to think clearly. When depressed, one tends to think about past failures and regrets. Sometimes thoughts about one’s own shortcomings dominate the cognitive landscape.

Depression almost always affixes a filter on a person’s thoughts that frames the world in a negative light. This filter is sometimes referred to as a **cognitive distortion**. Eeyore of the Winnie the Pooh books is a perfectly crafted character illustrating depression and its cognitive distortion.

In line with the mood of helplessness/hopelessness, depression leaves one thinking that “Nothing will work out” or that “I can’t make anything good happen.”

Some of the thoughts that depression brings about make it a potentially fatal illness. Under the fog of hopelessness and despair, many depressed individuals perceive that life is not worth living and find it difficult to think about existing into the future. **Suicidal thoughts** are very common in depression and unfortunately, 15% of all depressed people will commit suicide. This is a very alarming statistic.

Depressed people usually feel bad about themselves. They blame themselves for their own difficulties. They see their depression as evidence of a character flaw and they feel unloved and unlovable.

Due to the moods, the loss of energy, and the cognitive distortions, people with depression often **isolate** themselves. They turn down invitations and cancel others at the last minute. They turn on the answering machine when they are home and do not return calls right away. They might misinterpret a lack of a phone call or a tone of voice as evidence that the friend is angry. Even when they are given support by others, depressed people might find it difficult to take in the support or to use it as salve to their wounded soul. It is often difficult for depressed persons to attend parties and sometimes it is even difficult for them to engage in everyday conversation.

Behavior also changes in depression. Depressed people might find themselves wearing dark clothes or disregarding personal appearance. They may **neglect self-care**. They may put things off like returning phone calls and paying bills.

### **Treatment for Depression**

If you or someone you know are experiencing depression it is important to get help. Do not try to diagnose or treat your depression yourself. Depression is not a weakness in your character. It is an illness for which there are really good treatments available.

The very first step in getting treatment is to get a thorough diagnostic assessment. This can be performed by almost any good mental health practitioner—psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker, professional counselor. Some primary care physicians can also assess for depression—some are not as familiar with it. Your first step might be, however, to talk with your physician, tell him or her about your symptoms, and ask for a referral to a mental health practitioner.

Once you have an accurate diagnosis, seek psychotherapy and medical intervention for your depression. Your physician may be able to prescribe something for you. There are many different forms of antidepressant medication and not all medications work the same for all patients. If the medication prescribed does not work, then it may be important for you to see a specialist. Psychiatrists are trained in different uses and combinations of antidepressant medications and may be the best person to find which medicines will work for you.

Psychotherapy is a very effective treatment for depression. There are many different forms of psychotherapy. Some are short-term and educational. However, if you have an

underlying psychological disorder or if you are seeking assistance in changing patterns that perpetuate depression, then you are more likely to benefit from longer term psychotherapy.

### **Self-Help Tips for Depression**

1. Give your body a chance to heal by treating it well.

Get back into a regular sleep routine. Go to bed at a reasonable hour leaving yourself enough time to get a full night's sleep. After 8 or 9 hours, get out of bed, go directly into the shower (or bath) and get dressed. The more you get yourself into a regular routine, the more your body will begin to pull itself out of the depression.

2. Get your diet back into balance.

Feed your body nutritious foods on a regular schedule. Eat breakfast, lunch and dinner and make these meals nutritious and healthful. Take vitamins in order to restore your body's balance.

3. Do nice things for your body.

If you were recovering from a physical illness, you would take extra good care of yourself. You must take good care of your body when recovering from an emotional illness as well. This means:

**EXERCISE:** Exercise actually stimulates the release of body chemicals called endorphins, which act like morphine or opium in the body to bring about pleasant feelings. Exercise is a potent stress reducer. Another fringe benefit is that being fit is good for your self-esteem.

**YOGA** and **TAI CHI** are other forms of activity that enable fitness and well-being.

**HOT BATHS** or **JACUZZI BATHS** are great for improving well being. Many of those mall body shops have aroma therapy bath beads that leave you with a pleasant feeling during and after bathing.

**MASSAGE** can be an incredibly healing experience. There are many certified massage therapists in the area that are reputable and competent. Seek one out.

4. Educate yourself about depression and its treatment.

It is critical for your becoming an active member of your treatment team. Go to lectures, read books, get on the internet, join support groups. Learn as much as you can about depression and its treatment so that you can ascertain whether your treatment is effective.

5. Work on changing negative thought patterns.

Instead of making excuses when someone gives you a compliment, say "thank you" and accept it.

Reflect on your successes and accomplishments in life. Screen out your own critiques of these accomplishments and internal lists of failures. Write a list of these achievements. If you are having trouble coming up with your list, ask someone close to you for some help.

Begin to monitor your own negative filters. When you catch yourself saying something to yourself that Eeyore might say, stop and think about how Pooh might see it. In this way you can begin to change your negative filters to positive or neutral filters.

Give yourself time to heal and patience for the process.

## 6. Develop or Redevelop your support system.

Initiate phone calls to friends you have been ignoring. Call just to say “HI,” or to invite a friend to lunch.

Open up to your closer friends. Tell them that you have been out of contact because you have been suffering from a clinical depression. Tell them that you are working on healing and need their patience and understanding. Ask them to keep calling and inviting and insisting.

Accept invitations even when you don’t feel like going.

Seek out and attend support groups for depression or therapy groups.

## 7. Find meaning in your life.

Find or rediscover your church, synagogue, or faith. This serves both a spiritual function and a social function. It need not be any organized religion—you might just want to rekindle your awe of nature.

Find or rediscover a cause. It could be your religious group, the homeless, a political cause or anything else that adds meaning to life. There are many benefits to working for a cause. First, helping others just feels good—it helps us feel like we are good people making contributions to this world.

Second, helping others who are less fortunate than ourselves reminds us to count our blessings and this, in turn, helps us appreciate our lives a little more.

Third, helping others provides a well-needed distraction from depression. Keeping busy helps and keeping busy with something meaningful helps even more. Finally, volunteering provides us with more social contacts among people who have similar interests and values to us.

## 8. Develop your SELF.

Begin listening to your inner voice instead of turning it off. Psychotherapy can help you do this.

Express your creativity.

If you have had a passing interest in art, music, quilting, writing, dance—develop this. Take dance classes, start a journal, participate in quilting groups, sit at the piano and write music. Disregard the quality of your creative output. The purpose is your expression, not someone else’s appreciation.

Depression is a multifaceted illness that takes many forms: it has many different symptoms, and comes from many different causes. Depression is very common and as many as 10% of all Americans will suffer from depression at some point in their lifetime. Even though it is common, it is not something that should be ignored.

Depression should be treated and the first step in treatment of depression is getting an accurate diagnosis. When the right kind of help is found, depression can be treated successfully.

