

Depression

Having a bad day, feeling sad or blue, and experiencing grief are normal parts of our daily human experience. They happen for all of us from time to time in our lifetime. They occur as natural emotional responses to difficult life experiences, such as disappointments, losses in friendships or relationships, death of a loved one and even life transitions. Coping with these normal feelings is best handled by acknowledging them, talking about them with friends and family, and keeping them in perspective.

Sometimes, however, these feelings of sadness can be intense, overwhelming and persistent to such an extent that they make daily functioning (e.g., eating, sleeping, going to classes, etc.) extremely difficult or even impossible. When this happens, there is a good chance that someone is suffering from clinical depression, and should seek the help of a mental health professional as soon as possible.

What is depression?

Clinical depression is a disturbance of mood that is characterized by sadness and depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure in nearly all activities, and feelings of worthlessness, helplessness and hopelessness. Depression can be overwhelming and pervasive, affecting many areas of one's life. In some cases, the feelings can become so overwhelming that one thinks the only option is hurting themselves or ending their life. The ability to recognize these symptoms and patterns in yourself or someone you know can help ward off severe depression and even possibly negative events, such as academic trouble, losing a job, and even hurting one's self. If you or someone you know is experiencing depression, the best thing to do is seek help.

Is it treatable?

Clinical depression is generally treatable with counseling and/or medication. With treatment, people often report significant relief within four to six weeks. Untreated, depression can last many months to even years, sometimes with grave consequences.

Signs and Symptoms of Depression

Emotional

- Depressed mood and sadness most of the day, nearly every day.
- For some individuals, mood may also be anxious or irritable.
- Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all activities--even ones that used to feel good.
- Exaggerated feelings of self-blame, worthlessness and guilt.

- Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.
- Wanting to be by one's self or isolation, but at the same time feeling lonely.
- Thoughts of suicide (e.g., wanting to kill oneself, wanting to die, or a belief that others would be better off if one were dead).

Behavioral

- Diminished ability to concentrate or focus on things that one could concentrate on before.
- Difficulty with thinking, memory or making decisions.
- Academic and/or occupational difficulties
- Isolation from friends, family and other important/significant people in your life.
- Loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities and interactions.
- Significant reduction from previous levels of sexual interest or desire.
- Difficulty leaving one's room and not able to complete everyday tasks and activities.
- Crying for no apparent reason.
- Beginning or increasing use of drugs or alcohol or other behavior to escape from one's feelings

Physical

- Feeling persistently lethargic, tired and/or fatigued--even after a full night's sleep.
- Changes in sleeping habits (e.g., difficulty falling asleep, waking up in the middle of the night and experiencing trouble going back to sleep, or sleeping much longer hours).
- Changes in eating habits and/or weight changes (e.g., decreased or increased appetite, or loss or gain of significant weight when trying not to).
- Physical agitation (e.g., inability to sit still, feeling restless or fidgety) or physical slowing (e.g., slowed speech, thinking, or body movements) that is noticeably by others.
- Gastrointestinal difficulties (stomach ache, diarrhea).
- Persistent headaches.

If someone experiences most of the above symptoms for nearly every day for more than two weeks, they may be suffering from clinical depression, and they should contact a mental health professional immediately.

What if a friend needs help?

If you suspect a friend is suffering from depression, you can be most helpful by being supportive and patient and letting the person know that you are concerned and that you will be there for him or her.

If you suspect someone is thinking about suicide, it is OK to ask directly. Asking does not increase the risk of suicide, and often people feel more relieved. If your friend has any suicidal thoughts or his/her symptoms persist and seem to interfere with daily living activities, strongly encourage your friend to seek professional help and particularly inform them about the Counseling Center.

If they seem hesitant about coming, you might suggest walking over with them to talk to someone. Counselors can also give advice if you need help on how to approach a friend about whom you may be concerned.

Community Resources:

Contra Costa Crisis Center

Crisis hotline: 925-472-0999 or 1-800-833-2900

Provides 24-hour crisis line, grief counseling, information and referral.

Websites on the Internet:

Depression Central

<http://www.psychom.net/depression.central.html#contents>

Serves as a central clearing house for information on all types of depressive disorders.

Mental Health Net: Depression

<http://www.mentalhelp.net>

Focuses on information about symptoms, treatment of Depression, also online resources and support, and organizations.

Wings of Madness: A Depression Guide

<http://www.wingsofmadness.com>

In addition to general information, it also provides web listings for online support groups, information on manic depression, medication, treatment, suicide resources, and a recommended reading list of books that cover a variety of aspects.

University of Chicago: Virtual Pamphlet Collection on Depression

<http://www.counseling.uchicago.edu/vpc/virtulets.html>

Offers an excellent listing of links to topics such as coping with depression, the grieving process, homesickness, loneliness, suicide and suicide prevention and affirmations