



What Is Depression?

Everyone feels sad, down, or discouraged from time to time. These feelings are a normal part of life and usually pass with time. **Depression** (also called **major depressive disorder** or **clinical depression**) is different. It is a common but serious mental health condition that negatively affects how you feel, the way you think, and how you act. Fortunately, depression is treatable, and with the right support, most people can recover and lead fulfilling lives.

Depression causes persistent feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed. It can lead to a variety of emotional, physical, and behavioural problems and may reduce your ability to function at work, school, or at home. Symptoms can range from mild to severe and may include:

- Feeling sad, empty, hopeless, or having a persistently depressed mood.
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities that were once enjoyable.
- Changes in appetite, leading to weight loss or weight gain unrelated to dieting.
- Trouble sleeping (insomnia) or sleeping too much (hypersomnia).
- Loss of energy, persistent tiredness, or increased fatigue.
- Increased purposeless physical activity (such as inability to sit still, pacing, or handwringing) or slowed movements and speech. These changes must be noticeable to others.
- Feeling worthless, excessively guilty, or blaming yourself unnecessarily.
- Difficulty thinking, concentrating, remembering, or making decisions.
- Recurrent thoughts of death, suicidal thoughts, or suicide attempts.

For a diagnosis of depression, these symptoms must last for **at least two weeks** and represent a noticeable change from the person's previous level of functioning.

Some medical conditions, such as thyroid disorders, vitamin deficiencies, or brain conditions, can cause symptoms similar to depression. For this reason, it is important to rule out underlying medical causes before making a diagnosis.

Types of Depression

There are different types of depression. Symptoms can range from relatively mild (but still disabling) to very severe. The main types include:

- Major depressive disorder.
- Persistent depressive disorder (dysthymia).
- Bipolar disorder (formerly known as manic depression), which includes episodes of depression as well as periods of unusually elevated or irritable mood (mania or hypomania).
- Cyclothymic disorder, a milder but chronic form of bipolar disorder.
- Seasonal affective disorder (SAD), which typically occurs during certain times of the year, most commonly in the winter months.

Causes



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The exact cause of depression is not fully understood. It is believed to result from a combination of biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors rather than a single cause.

Factors that may contribute include:

- Genetic or family history of depression.
- Changes or imbalances in brain chemicals (neurotransmitters) that regulate mood.
- Stressful or traumatic life events, including loss, conflict, abuse, or financial difficulties.
- Psychological factors, such as negative thinking patterns or low self-esteem.
- Social factors, including loneliness, social isolation, or lack of support.
- Ongoing physical illnesses or chronic pain.
- Other mental health conditions, such as bipolar disorder or anxiety disorders.

How Is Depression Treated?

Depression can be serious, but it is highly treatable. The most effective treatment depends on the severity of symptoms and the individual's needs. Treatment options include:

Self-help: Regular physical activity, getting enough sleep, eating a balanced diet, maintaining daily routines, practising relaxation techniques, and spending time with supportive family and friends can help reduce symptoms and improve overall well-being.

Counselling (Psychotherapy): Counselling involves talking with a trained mental health professional to understand thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Therapy helps people develop healthy coping skills, solve problems, and manage stress. Common approaches include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), interpersonal therapy (IPT), and other evidence-based therapies. Some people benefit from short-term therapy, while others may require longer-term support.

Medication: Antidepressant medications can help regulate brain chemicals involved in mood. These medications usually take several weeks before their full effects are noticed. Some people may experience side effects, which often improve over time. A healthcare provider can adjust the medication if needed to find the most effective treatment.

Complementary and Alternative Therapies: Some people with mild depression or persistent symptoms may benefit from complementary approaches, such as massage therapy, acupuncture, mindfulness, yoga, meditation, hypnosis, or biofeedback. These approaches should be used alongside, rather than as a replacement for, evidence-based treatment when appropriate.

Brain Stimulation Therapies: For people with severe depression, treatment-resistant depression, or depression with psychotic symptoms, brain stimulation therapies may be recommended. These include:

- Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT).
- Transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS).
- Vagus nerve stimulation (VNS).



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Early recognition and treatment can greatly improve recovery. If you or someone you know is experiencing symptoms of depression, seeking help from a qualified healthcare or mental health professional is an important first step.

References

- American Psychiatric Association. *What Is Depression?* <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/depression/what-is-depression>
- Better Health Channel. *Depression – Treatment and Management.* <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/depression-treatment-and-management>
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