

# Signs and Symptoms of Depression<sup>1</sup>

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## Overview

A diagnosis of major depressive disorder represents an often debilitating illness that affects approximately 7% of adults in the United States. A clinical case of depression is separated from everyday blues in terms of the duration and severity of depressive symptoms. Periodic bouts of sadness or a depressed mood that lasts a few days are relatively common, but are not the same as major depressive disorder.

Here is a list of the signs or symptoms of major depressive disorder:

- Sadness, depressed mood, crying over seemingly minor setbacks
- Poor self-concept, low self-esteem, reluctance toward attempting endeavors
- Loss of interest in previously pleasurable activities
- Changes in appetite (decreased appetite most common) often signaled by rapid weight gain or loss.
- Changes in sleep patterns (not enough or too much sleep)
- Slowed, inhibited actions (slow, soft speech; slowed body movements).
- Fatigue, loss of pep and energy
- Poor concentration, attention, and/or memory.
- Thoughts or words about death or suicide.

Most people will experience some of these symptoms from time to time, but in order for it to be considered major depression; you should be experiencing at least 5 of these symptoms, continuously, for at least 2 weeks. At least one of those symptoms needs to be sadness/depressed mood or loss of interest in activities that were previously pleasurable.

**Depression** is *not* grieving. Grieving the loss of a loved one may include some or all of the symptoms of depression. However, it is important to remember that these feelings of sadness and physical, and emotional fatigue are often a normal part of the grieving process. It is possible that an extremely long period of grieving may develop into an episode of depression, but that is a fairly rare experience

Depression is more common in adults than in children, but it does occur in children. When children are depressed, their symptoms might be different from adults. For example, rather than showing sadness or crying, some children behave badly or show a lot of anger. They may be more cranky than usual, become picky about food, or may show a lack of interest in their usual activities.

## What Causes Depression?

Scientists do not know exactly what causes depression, and the cause might be different for each person. There is some evidence that people's genes may make them more likely to get depressed, because people are more likely to experience depression if they have other family members (especially

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close family members) who have experienced depression. Some research has shown that brain structure or activity is different during depression, and depression is associated with disruptions of the brain chemicals. There is also some evidence that having your hormones out of balance can contribute to depression. Stressful life events can trigger depression in someone who may already be vulnerable to getting depressed. Finally, certain medical conditions or medications can cause depression or symptoms that look like depression. For example, hypothyroidism (low levels of thyroid hormone) can look like depression in some people.

## Treatment

There are several effective treatments for depression, including the use of counseling, medication, or a combination of both. Decades of research suggest that not all depressed individuals respond the same way to each of these treatments, but most people (more than 80%) improve with appropriate treatment. Research suggests that most people with depression benefit the most from a combination of counseling and medication.

## How to Get Help

If you think that you or someone you care about might be experiencing major depressive disorder, you may wish to discuss it with your doctor first, and he or she can help you to figure out whether this is a problem for you. If so, your doctor may be able to help you find a medication to help you, or could refer you for counseling. There are licensed psychologists and other licensed mental health professionals in most communities, and often there are community mental health clinics that provide low cost services.

## References

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