

Depression is a common, treatable condition

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Everyone feels down in the dumps sometimes. But if your feelings linger, it would probably be a good idea to talk with your doctor or a mental health professional to see whether you are suffering from depression.

Depression is a complex disorder that can make your life and the lives of people around you unhappy. A few people think seeking help will cast a stigma on them, but the truth is that receiving professional help can make a big difference in their lives, and today most people don't look negatively on counseling.

There are many degrees of depression, ranging from a dysthymia – a low-grade, persistent form – to major depressive disorders that prevent people from functioning normally and can even lead to suicide.

Typical symptoms of depression include:

- Losing interest in things that were once pleasurable,
- Disturbed eating or sleeping patterns,
- Upheaval in interpersonal relations,
- Low motivation and
- Anxiety.

Most people who are depressed have more than one of these symptoms.

Generally, treatment has two aspects, medication and counseling. A physician may prescribe antidepressant medication to relieve symptoms, but that's just a start. The more difficult part is counseling, which helps sort out issues that may have contributed to the depressive episode. By seeing patterns in behaviors and relationships, patients can approach them more productively in the future.

The combination of taking medication for six months to a year and counseling can help most people. Occasionally, a patient with severe depression may try many medications and counseling approaches that don't work and be recommended for electroconvulsive therapy, but that is not common.

Depression seems to run in families. Some of the connection is probably genetic, but people who grow up in families where depressive behavior is normal may have their thought patterns molded by their environment. Patients who confront those thoughts and actions in counseling can change their outlook.

If you have a friend or family member who you think might be depressed, you'd be doing her a favor to gently express concerns and observations about her mood. If your friend

had a large growth on her neck, you'd suggest she see her doctor. Making the same suggestion to her if you think she's depressed is no different.

A physician is a good starting place, but patients also seek counseling without referrals, and we encourage that as well.

Many of us are unaware that children become depressed, too. Major life events such as death of a parent or divorce can be associated with childhood depression. Poor school performance or refusal to play outdoors with friends during the summer might be indications a child needs professional attention.

And if you are depressed, don't berate yourself for failing to be strong. Depression has nothing to do with strength or weakness. The sooner you seek help, the sooner you'll feel better.