Depression is a common condition affecting one in every 10 Americans each year. It is a disease that can affect a person of any age, race or social standing. But depression is never “normal,” and always causes unnecessary suffering.

Common misperceptions of depression liken it to sadness, or a down mood that sufferers could snap out of if they would only try. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Life events such as job loss, divorce or the death of a loved one cause grief and sadness, but the sadness gradually lifts over time. But, untreated depression can continue for months or even years.

What causes depression?

There are several factors that play a role in the onset of depression. Abnormalities in two chemicals in the brain, serotonin and norepinephrine, might contribute to the anxiety, irritability and fatigue associated with depression. And major depression is often tied to changes in the brain structure or function. Other factors include:

- **Genetics** – Depression can run in families, which suggests that the tendency to develop depression can be inherited.
- **Environment** – Experiences with violence, neglect, abuse or poverty can make a person more vulnerable to depression.
- **Medical conditions** – With some medical conditions, depression is a symptom. With others it is a side effect of medications or the condition itself. It is important to be evaluated by a doctor to make sure depression is not tied to some underlying medical issue.
- **Stress** – The stress that comes with a job loss, financial difficulties, the breakdown of a significant relationship or the loss of a loved one can put one into a state of depression. Even happy changes, like a new house, a job promotion or a new baby, can cause a great deal of stress and can in turn trigger a depressive episode.

Someone I care about is suffering from depression. How can I help?

A depressed person often feels overwhelmed, hopeless and apathetic. These feelings make it difficult for him or her to seek treatment. Encourage your loved one to speak with a doctor about what he or she is feeling, and to follow the doctor’s recommended treatment. Sometimes, you may need to take the initiative of making the appointment and taking your loved one to the doctor. Or you might need to monitor whether the depressed person is taking his or her medication and whether there is any improvement.

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A depressed person needs emotional support in the form of understanding, patience and encouragement. Listen carefully when you talk with your loved one, and encourage him or her to spend time with other people. Try, without pushing too much, to engage him or her in activities he or she once enjoyed. When he or she expresses negative feelings, gently point out more positive realities and offer hope. If he or she speaks of suicide, report the comments to the depressed person’s therapist or doctor.

Try to remember that your loved one is not pretending, being lazy or trying to get attention with his or her behavior. Caring for a depressed person can be demanding, but with treatment most people do get better. Be patient, and reassure your loved one that he or she will not always feel this way — with time and help he or she will feel better.

What should I do if I think I am suffering from depression?

If you think you might be experiencing depression, ask for help. Contact your doctor, or ask a trusted friend or family member to help you get the medical treatment you need. Remember, most people do not just “snap out” of a depression, so it is important to get professional help and follow your doctor’s instructions.

Until you get better, try to set realistic goals for yourself about what you can do. Break large tasks into smaller ones and prioritize them so you feel less overwhelmed. Spend time with people and try to engage in activities that you enjoy. Avoid making major decisions, as depression can cloud your thinking and make you view things in a more negative light than you would otherwise. Discuss any big changes with people who have known you well for a long time, and get their advice. Finally, be patient with yourself. Remind yourself that things are not as bad as they seem, and that as your illness responds to treatment you will be able to see things as they truly are.

How do I know if I am suffering from depression?

Not everyone suffering from depression will experience every symptom, and symptoms may vary in severity. Common symptoms of depression include:

- A persistent sad, anxious or empty mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism, guilt, worthlessness or helplessness
- Loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed, including sex
- Feelings of fatigue, low energy, or being slowed down
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Sleep difficulties, such as insomnia, waking too early in the morning, or oversleeping
- Overeating and weight gain, or loss of appetite and weight loss
- Thoughts of death or suicide; suicide attempts
- Restlessness or irritability
- Persistent physical problems not responding to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders and chronic pain
Did you know?

Different cultures interpret the symptoms of depression in different ways. Latino and Mediterranean cultures speak of nervousness or headaches. Asian cultures describe depression as tiredness, physical weakness or imbalance. Middle Eastern and Native American cultures call it heartbreak or heart problems. The variations in the way depression is talked about can make it hard for doctors to diagnose. So tell your health care provider if you feel like your symptoms are being misinterpreted or misunderstood.

Resources

If you or someone you know is suicidal, call 911 right away.

For situations that are not immediately life-threatening, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255 (TALK).

In addition to your family doctor, you may be able to find help in dealing with depression by speaking with a clergy member, family service or social agency, or by calling the number provided by your employee assistance program.

Visit WebMD’s Depression Health Center for information and decision support tools, or to learn about commonly prescribed medications. There are also calendars available online at dbsalliance.org for tracking your mood along with factors such as your sleep patterns, other medication use, alcohol and/or recreational drug use.

Such a record can help your doctor make an accurate diagnosis. It will also help you see behavioral patterns that affect your mood and mental health.

Visit unicarestateplan.com for more ways to get healthy — and stay healthy.