



# Depression

Information from Kenneth Thompson, MD  
*Milestone Staff Psychiatrist*

## What is depression?

Depression is a disorder whose primary hallmark is that it affects a person's mood state, causing them to feel very sad or empty, with little capacity to enjoy themselves or feel motivated. People who are depressed often feel anxious or very badly about themselves. Some feel guilty about things they have done or think they have done. They also have disturbances in eating and sleeping - with some people doing too much or too little of each. It can lead to substance abuse and neglect of health problems. In some people, it can lead to thoughts of suicide.

## Are there “typical causes” for depression? If so, what are they?

The causes of depression are not known. What is known is that whatever the causes are, they are very complex. There appears to be some contribution from our genes, from our families and from what happens to us during our lives. We think that the way that the brain works - and how various neurotransmitters function - are part of the puzzle. But we also know that the meaning of things to a person and the problems they face in life also contribute. We know that medications and various kinds of psychotherapy and social support can help.

## What are the warning signs of depression?

The key signs of depression are first feeling sad, empty or irritable most of the time. Feeling bad about oneself is a hallmark of depression too. Eating or sleeping too much or too little is a possible sign. Drinking alcohol or using drugs frequently can be a sign. Losing pleasure or motivation are also major signs. Thoughts of suicide that carry any intention are also warning signs.

## Can heredity / genetics predispose an individual? If so are there any “preventative measures” one can take?

It is known the depression runs in families. This is likely due to genetics and the family environment. So there is some likelihood that if one person in a family has depression, others may as well. At present there is no known way to prevent depression other than the very important work of living as healthy a life as possible - with attention to eating and sleeping well, addressing problems as they occur, pursuing meaningful activities and working to maintain mutually satisfying relationships.

## Is depression more prevalent in a certain gender or age group?

Women present with depression more than men - but men present with more substance abuse histories. There is a thought that depressed men may use substances as a way to manage their depression. Depression presents in all age groups and is somewhat different in each age group because the circumstance and life challenges people face vary with age.



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## **What can family or loved ones do to support and help?**

Families and loved ones can understand that people can't just “snap out of it”. It takes time and effort to recover from depression. Encouragement and support go a long, long way. Importantly, when family members and loved ones feel overwhelmed, they should seek help themselves and do what they can to help the loved one seek or continue in treatment. It's often useful to join a family support group.

## **Please explain the effectiveness and benefits of treatments and prescribed medications?**

Psychotherapy, social supports, solving pressing life problems and medication are very effective treatments when used together. There are generally few side effects or risks that can't be managed. However, some depressions can be hard to treat effectively - and there can be a prolonged trial of medication and therapy before something is found that works. A key issue here is to understand that recovering from depression is not just a simple process of taking a pill. It actually takes work and people with depression have to put effort into restarting their lives. It's hard but it's worth it!

## **Can children (under 18) be prone to depression? And if so, are their warning signs the same? Are treatments effective for children?**

Children can suffer from depression too, though perhaps not as much as adults until they reach adolescence. It tends to show up in their behavior more than in the way they talk. They may not seem to enjoy things like they did, have more tantrums, stop working at school etc. They may sleep and eat more or less. There are effective treatments for children. Often times psychotherapy therapy and family engagement is enough to turn the tide. Medications can be used but ideally are used sparingly.

## **What dangers do individuals (and their loved ones) face if depression is left untreated?**

Besides the ongoing suffering, untreated depression increases the set backs in life that come with depression as people do not function at their highest level. It exacts a cost on loved ones too and on relationships. Of course there is also the rare but real risk of injury and or death by suicide and homicide. Treatment is the better option!