



RECOGNIZING DEPRESSION

RECOGNIZING DEPRESSION AS A SERIOUS HEALTH PROBLEM

Attitudes play an important role in determining whether the warning signs of depression are recognized. The idea that depression comes from a personal weakness or lack of will power is nothing more than an old wives' tale but it persists. Outdated views such as these can make it difficult for someone to acknowledge the symptoms of clinical depression as the warning signs of a serious illness and to get the necessary help for it.

By learning more about depressive disorders and their symptoms, people can recognize situations (within themselves or people they know) that call for help from a mental health professional.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF DEPRESSION

Depression is used to describe several different types of disorders, and scientists use many different (and sometimes complicated) systems to classify them according to their symptoms, severity, causes and other characteristics. The important thing to know is that depression can take many forms, affecting each person differently, and that some depressive disorders have symptoms that are very different from the "sad" behavior we normally associate with depression. To simplify things as much as possible, depressive disorders can generally be divided into two categories: depressive illnesses and manic-depressive illnesses.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

- Depression is an illness, not a personal weakness
- The symptoms of depression are recognizable
- Treatment is available

CHECKLIST FOR DEPRESSIVE ILLNESS

Check any symptoms below that you or someone you know has experienced for more than two weeks.

- Sad, anxious, or "empty" mood
- Loss of interest or pleasure in ordinary activities, including sex
- Decreased energy; fatigue, feeling "slowed down"
- Sleep problems (insomnia, oversleeping, etc.)
- Eating problems (loss of appetite, overeating)
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering
- Inappropriate feelings of guilt or worthlessness
- Irritability
- Recurring aches and pains
- Thoughts of death or suicide

CHECKLIST FOR MANIC-DEPRESSIVE ILLNESS

These symptoms usually appear in periods that alternate with episodes of symptoms on the list above. Again, consider seeing a mental health professional if four or more persist for more than two weeks.

- Excessively “high” mood
- Decreased need for sleep
- Increased energy
- Increased talking, moving or sexual activity
- Racing thoughts
- Disturbed ability to make decisions
- Over-confidence; grandiose notions
- Being easily distracted

DEPRESSION AND OTHER ILLNESSES

Sometimes depression can look like other illnesses with symptoms such as headaches, backaches, joint pain, stomach problems and other physical ailments. People with depression often focus on these symptoms because they’re easier to describe than feelings of sadness, anxiety or tiredness.

Some signs of depression—such as memory lapse and difficulty concentrating—can mimic other disorders or medical problems while other problems – such as alcoholism and substance abuse – may actually indicate an attempt to self-medicate a depressive disorder. It’s always important to have a thorough medical examination to rule out other disorders before beginning treatment for depression.

TREATMENT IS AVAILABLE

Depression won’t go away by itself, but in most cases, there is effective treatment available—treatment that in many cases can relieve symptoms in a few short weeks. Treatment usually comes in the form of medications, psychotherapy or a combination of both.

Medication is used to alter brain chemicals to improve mood, sleep, energy levels and concentration. Different people need different medications and some need more than one to treat their depression. Psychotherapy also comes in many forms: cognitive therapy aims to help the patient recognize and change negative thinking patterns that can make their disorder worse; while interpersonal therapy focuses on helping the person deal more effectively with other people, because good relationships can help reduce the problems associated with depression.

WHERE TO GET HELP

Many different types of professionals in as many different settings can help treat depression. For a local referral to a mental health specialist, please call one of the numbers below or contact your family physician, health maintenance organization or community clinic. The list of national organizations can also provide information on what’s available in your community as well as additional information on depressive disorders.