



WHO GETS DEPRESSION?

At least 10 million Americans have some form of clinical depression in any given six-month period, making it one of the most prevalent illnesses in our society today.

Its causes are believed to be largely biological and, like many other serious disorders, depression knows no social, economic or gender boundaries. Its symptoms—which include prolonged feelings of hopelessness and sadness, irritability, major changes in eating and sleeping habits, concentration/memory difficulties and physical complaints such as headaches or back pain—are likely to affect 25 percent of all women and 11.5 percent of all men at one time or another.

Children as young as five have been treated for depression, and some scientists estimate that as many as 65 percent of older Americans many have some form of depression.

The National Mental Health Association developed this fact sheet to provide basic information on the prevalence of depressive disorders. Please feel free to photocopy it and share it with others.

DEPRESSION IN WOMEN

Depressive disorders are reported to affect twice as many women as men (twenty-five percent of women vs. eleven percent of men). It's not yet known whether this difference is caused by something in the biological makeup of women that make them more likely to have depression, or whether the numbers simply indicate that women are more likely than men to seek treatment for depression. Some scientists believe that fewer men are diagnosed because their depression is masked behind alcoholism or antisocial behavior.

DEPRESSION IN MEN

Slightly more than 11 percent of all American men will have a depressive disorder at some time in their lives. While lower than the number of women diagnosed with depression, this number dramatically illustrates how prevalent depression is in our society—and 11 percent is judged by many scientists to be far lower than the actual number of men with depression!

While women are more likely to attempt suicide than men, men are twice as likely to succeed because they generally use more lethal means. Scientists believe that suicide is often caused by depression.

DEPRESSION AND OLDER AMERICANS

Diagnosing depression among older Americans is extremely difficult, which accounts for the fact that estimates of how many older people have depression range from 10 to 65 percent.

Symptoms of depression in aged populations are often misdiagnosed as those of other illnesses. For example, memory loss, confused thinking or apathy is often attributed to senility (an organic brain syndrome) when they could actually be caused by clinical depression. On the other hand, early-waking and reduced appetite—both symptoms of depression—are common among older Americans who do not have depression.

While the resulting confusion on how to diagnose depression in older populations causes some controversy, it is known that self-report tests from this age-group acknowledge more of the symptoms of depression than any other group. Older Americans also commit suicide at higher rates than any other U.S. population.

Careful observation by a knowledgeable person and a sophisticated medical evaluation may be necessary to recognize depression in an older person.

DEPRESSION IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

While depression is known to affect all ages of children—from the very young to older adolescents—it is often difficult to detect. By nature, child and adolescent behavior is somewhat erratic, and people this age aren't always able to express their feelings and needs very well.

In many cases, depressive disorders express themselves differently in children and youth than in adults. Unable to cope with feelings of hopelessness or pessimism and other symptoms associated with depression, children may act out aggressively and develop a sense of rebellion at school and at home. At other times, their symptoms are dismissed as simply “part of growing up.”

Like adults, some may “self-medicate” their illness with alcohol or drugs, further obscuring the true nature of their problems. Poor performance in school, sexual promiscuity, running away and truancy—all usually attributed to “bad behavior”—might actually be warning signs of depressive disorder.

Fortunately, the same help available for depression in adults is effective for children and adolescents.