

# Depression and How Psychotherapy and Other Treatments Can Help People Recover

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, an estimated 17 million adult Americans suffer from depression during any 1-year period. Depression is a real illness and carries with it a high cost in terms of relationship problems, family suffering, and lost work productivity. Yet, depression is a highly treatable illness.

## **How Does Depression Differ From Occasional Sadness?**

Everyone feels sad or "blue" on occasion. It is also perfectly normal to grieve over upsetting life experiences, such as a major illness, a death in the family, a loss of a job, or a divorce. But, for most people, these feelings of grief and sadness tend to lessen with the passing of time.

However, if a person's feelings of sadness last for 2 weeks or longer, and if they interfere with daily life activities, something more serious than "feeling blue" may be going on.

Depressed individuals tend to feel helpless and hopeless and to blame themselves for having these feelings. People who are depressed may become overwhelmed and exhausted and may stop participating in their routine activities. They may withdraw from family and friends. Some may even have thoughts of death or suicide.

## **What Causes Depression?**

There is no single answer to this question. Some depression is caused by changes in the body's chemistry that influence mood and thought processes. Biological factors can also cause depression. In other cases, depression is a sign that certain mental and emotional aspects of a person's life are out of balance. For example, significant life transitions and life stresses, such as the death of a loved one, can bring about a depressive episode.

## **Can Depression Be Successfully Treated?**

Yes, it can. A person's depression is highly treatable when he or she receives competent care. It is critical for people who suspect that they or a family member may be suffering from depression seek care from a licensed mental health professional who has training and experience in helping people recover from depression. Simply put, people with depression who do not seek help suffer needlessly. Unexpressed feelings and concerns accompanied by a sense of isolation can worsen a depression; therefore, the importance of getting appropriate help cannot be overemphasized.

## **How Does Psychotherapy Help People Recover From Depression?**

Several approaches to psychotherapy, including cognitive-behavioral, interpersonal, and psychodynamic, help depressed people recover. Psychotherapy offers people the opportunity to identify the factors that contribute to their depression and to deal

effectively with the psychological, behavioral, interpersonal, and situational causes. Skilled therapists can work with depressed individuals to:

**Pinpoint the life problems that contribute to their depression and help them understand which aspects of those problems they may be able to solve or improve.**

A trained therapist can help depressed patients identify options for the future and set realistic goals that enable them to enhance their mental and emotional well-being. Therapists also help individuals identify how they have successfully dealt with similar feelings if they have been depressed in the past.

**Identify negative or distorted thinking patterns that contribute to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness that accompany depression.**

For example, depressed individuals may tend to overgeneralize, that is, to think of circumstances in terms of "always" or "never." They may also take events personally. A trained and competent therapist can help nurture a more positive outlook on life.

**Explore other learned thoughts and behaviors that create problems and contribute to depression.**

For example, therapists can help depressed individuals understand and improve patterns of interacting with other people that contribute to their depression.

**Help people regain a sense of control and pleasure in life.**

Psychotherapy helps people see choices as well as gradually incorporate enjoyable, fulfilling activities back into their lives.

Having one episode of depression greatly increases the risk of having another episode. There is some evidence that ongoing psychotherapy may lessen the chance of future episodes or reduce their intensity. Through therapy, people can learn skills to avoid unnecessary suffering from later bouts of depression.

**In What Other Ways Do Therapists Help Depressed Individuals and Their Loved Ones?**

The support and involvement of family and friends can play a crucial role in helping someone who is depressed. Individuals in the "support system" can help by encouraging a depressed loved one to stick with treatment and practice the coping techniques and problem-solving skills he or she is learning through psychotherapy.

Living with a depressed person can be very difficult and stressful on family members and friends. The pain of watching a loved one suffer from depression can bring about feelings of helplessness and loss. Family or marital therapy may be beneficial in bringing together all the individuals affected by depression and helping them learn effective ways to cope together. This type of psychotherapy can also provide a good opportunity for individuals who have never experienced depression themselves to learn more about it and identify constructive ways of supporting a loved one who is suffering from depression.

**Are Medications Useful for Treating Depression?**

Medications can be very helpful for reducing the symptoms of depression in some people, particularly in cases of moderate to severe depression. Often a combination of psychotherapy and medications is the best course of treatment. However, given the potential side effects, any use of medication requires close monitoring by the physician who prescribes the drugs.

Some depressed individuals may prefer psychotherapy to the use of medications, especially if their depression is not severe. By conducting a thorough assessment, a licensed and trained mental health professional can help make recommendations about an effective course of treatment for an individual's depression.

### **In Summary**

Depression can seriously impair a person's ability to function in everyday situations. But the prospects for recovery for depressed individuals who seek professional care are very good. By working with a qualified and experienced therapist, people suffering from depression can help regain control of their lives.