

How to Determine if Someone is Clinically Depressed:

Are you or someone you know experiencing Major Depressive Disorder?

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Major Depressive Disorder-Defined

If you, or someone you know, has been feeling sad most of the day and can't seem to shake that down feeling, perhaps you or that person has Major Depressive Disorder. Dysthymia is a form of depression that is milder than Major Depression. It lasts for at least two years. We will be exploring Major Depressive Disorder that is not Dysthymia.

Depression can happen to anyone. It can be caused by a traumatic event, a change in body chemistry, or a sense of deep loss. In some cases, an inherited family pattern can spark the depression. This is sometimes called a predisposition for depression. Depression is usually caused by what we perceive as a traumatic event. Therefore, depression is not a preventable condition. To one person, trauma can be a huge, horrible event, but to another, it can be something more subtle. Each person has his/her own reality, so another person cannot determine if a specific event was traumatic for another. Only you can determine what feels traumatic to you.

Feeling sad, having low energy, having a low libido, or being irritable can indicate an episode of Major Depressive Disorder. Notice the diagnosis is "disorder." This is not a mental illness that can only be treated and maintained with medication. It is a disorder, so just like a physical flu, this disorder can go away.

While sadness touches all of our lives at different times, the illness of depression can have enormous depth and staying power. If you have ever experienced depression or been close to someone who has, you know that this disorder cannot be changed at will. It cannot be wished or joked away either. It is not just the blues, and you cannot just "get over it."

Depression is similar to an emotional flu. When you go to the Medical Doctor and tell him/her you have symptoms such as fever, nausea, etc, the doctor may say, “Oh, you have the flu. Go home and get lots of rest. Drink lots of fluids and take care of yourself.”

So, you go home and say to yourself, “Self, this is so stupid. Why can I not get over this fever and throwing up?!” Right? No, you do not. You take care of yourself and let your body heal. Depression is a form of emotional flu. I instruct my clients to take care of themselves and let their mental body heal. Saying to yourself, “Self, this is so stupid. Why can I not just get over feeling drained and irritable?” Just as saying "get over it" for the physical flu symptoms won't cure the symptoms, you cannot just tell yourself to get over the depression.

Depression symptoms will tell you how the “emotional flu” is affecting your life. Depression flu symptoms are sometimes not as obvious as physical flu symptoms. Have you or someone you know changed recently? This person has no energy, a lack of concentration, and decreased libido. In children, irritability can be a symptom of depression. How do the mental health professionals determine if we are sad or having a Major Depressive Disorder episode?

Being depressed has nothing to do with personal weakness. Scientists have determined that changes in nerve pathways and brain chemicals called neurotransmitters can affect your moods and thoughts. These changes in brain chemistry may show up as symptoms of depression. This may include sleep problems, change in appetite, irritability, and decreased energy. Although these symptoms are signs of depression, if you talk to any two depressed people about their experiences, you may think they were describing entirely different realities. For example, one might not have the ability to maintain their usual energy level while the other might feel tired and unable to motivate themselves. Sometimes when people are depressed, it feels like they are up to their necks in mud. Everything is a huge effort. One person may feel sad and break into tears easily. One might pick at food without any appetite, and another might want to eat constantly. Depression symptoms are not universal, so each person will experience depression in his/her personal way.

Sometimes we slip into depression. The sad mood starts out light, and they slowly become deeper before we realize we are in the process of

slipping into a depressive state. We can use a check list as a reality check in order to see if our sad has slipped past the “just sad” mark into a depression zone.

Some studies show that depression has certain common patterns. For example, women are almost twice as likely as men to suffer from depression. While major depression may start at any time in life, the initial episode occurs, on average, during the mid-20s. One theory is that depression is anger turned inwards. If we identify our anger and express it towards the reason, then we are angry. That way, our depression may lessen or even dissolve. Men are notoriously taught it is not okay to cry, but it is okay to be angry. So when they are sad, sometimes they turn their emotions into anger. Women are generally taught it is okay to cry but not to be angry, so you guessed it: women have the tendency to turn anger into depression. This may account for the higher numbers of women than men experiencing depression.

Depression or hopelessness may feel so paralyzing that it makes seeking help seem impossible. Studies show the vast majority of people who receive professional treatment rebound emotionally within two to six weeks. Then they take pleasure in life once again. When Major Depression Disorder goes untreated, however, suffering can last for months. Furthermore, episodes of depression frequently recur. About half of those who sink into an episode of major depression will have at least one more episode later in his/her life.

Some researchers believe diagnosing depression early and treating it successfully can help forestall such recurrences. They suspect that the more episodes of depression you have experienced, the more likely you are to have future episodes because depression may cause enduring changes in brain circuits and chemicals that affect mood.

Counseling can also help identify and inherently remedy the underlying issues that may be the cause of your depression. Counseling can also help you change the way you look at events or the way you communicate your needs. It can also offer ways to empower you to be happy.

Can we prevent Major Depressive Disorder?

If we discover we have Major Depressive Disorder, are we stuck being sad for the rest of our life, or can we change the way we are feeling? Do we

have to take medication to make it all better? What can we do to get back to feeling like ourselves again? Once we climb out of a depression episode, what can we do to keep from falling in again? Our diet, exercise habits, and thinking patterns can play a part in the progression of the depression. Making changes now can offer long-term benefits to your mental health.

We can prevent depression by staying in touch with our feelings and being assertive about our needs and personal boundaries. In addition, we can also engage in some depression-prevention activities such as the following:

- **Stay active:** Physical activity is advantageous for your physical health, and it can also help to lift or prevent depression. Almost any type of physical activity for at least 30 minutes, three to five times a week, is enough to serve the purpose. Aerobic activity is good for lifting depressive symptoms when they are not severe. This includes walking, swimming, and any other movement that is repetitive. Aerobics for 20 minutes a day is recommended for lifting depression symptoms.
- **Stay connected with friends and family:** Keeping your social life active helps to keep your mind occupied and fulfilled. Sometimes people suffering from depression have the tendency to want to close the door and lock out the world. This only exacerbates the depressive symptoms. Taking steps to stay involved with the people in your life — and reaching out to meet new ones — can help to prevent depression from occurring.
- **Find somewhere to talk:** Sometimes a friend or family member is not enough. Preventive therapy, whether you choose to see a therapist one-on-one, in a support group, or even online counseling, can give you third party insight into your situation and help you through it.
- **Other activities:** Find an activity that you can enjoy without the help of others. You may enjoy yoga, tai chi, journaling, or reading. These activities can help relieve stress, and they serve as a distraction. Here's a word of caution: sometimes we keep busy, busy, busy in order to avoid our issues. Be sure you are not preventing yourself from addressing the underlying cause of your depression.
- **Care for your physical health:** If we don't feel good physically, it can affect our mental health. Have a medical doctor appointment to address your feelings of depression and trouble shoot about any physical symptoms

that may be adding to your ability to feel good emotionally. Remember to eat healthy. Whole grains are believed to help lift depression. Popcorn, whole oats, whole wheat, and oatmeal are all great ways to get our whole grains. Be careful when it comes to alcohol. It is a depressant and will consequently exacerbate the depression.

When you experience Major Depressive Disorder, usually the chemistry in your brain has been changed. Sometimes a chemical is necessary to change the brain chemistry back to “normal.” I am not sure what “normal” is, but to me, the word “normal” in this case means back to the real you. This chemical is called anti-depressant medication. There are dozens of anti-depressant medications and natural remedies. A consult with your physician would be a good place to start. If your doctor prescribes you an anti-depressant, and you experience undesirable side effects, then call consult with your doctor. Medication dosage or a change in medication may be in order for you. Just because one anti-depressant worked wonders for someone you know does not mean you will react to that same medication in the same manner.

Counseling can also help you identify and then remedy the underlying issues causing your depression. Counseling can help you change your way of looking at events, the way you communicate your needs, and it can offer ways to empower you to be happy. To help with recovery, see your physician, naturopath, herbalist, and/or counselor.

The symptom checklist is from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. This DSM is used by physicians, counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists to diagnosis Major Depressive Disorder. The following is a list of emotional and physical symptoms that may be indicative of Major Depressive Disorder. If you suspect your child is experiencing depression, then schedule a consultation with a counselor or physician.

Let us explore your symptoms with our DSM based check list. If you find you have five or more "yes" answers to the symptoms on the checklist below, medication is an option for you. Take a copy of the symptom check list with you to your doctor appointment.

Major Depressive Disorder-Symptoms Explored

Answering “yes” to five or more of these symptoms *may mean you have Major Depressive Disorder. If you suspect you are having an episode of Major Depressive Disorder, please consult with your physician.*

Appetite change/weight loss or gain total of five pounds or more. Do you eat more or less than usual?

Trouble sleeping

- o Trouble going to sleep
- o Trouble staying asleep
- o Trouble waking early

Trouble with concentration

Sad most of the day

Cry easily

Feeling helpless and hopeless

Feelings of worthlessness

Loss of interest in usually enjoyed activities

Energy level down

Sex drive/libido decreased

Suicidal thoughts or a definite plan

Irritable

Angry outbursts-suddenly you are mad and wonder, “Where did that come from?”

A tendency to isolate yourself, close your door, and keep the world away.

Some clinicians today believe that depression is caused by a combination of factors. Some factors include biological (including a possible predisposition to depressive episodes), social, and psychological. Treatment focusing exclusively on one of these areas may not be as helpful as a treatment that addresses all three issues.

Complementary and Alternative Treatments for Depression:

Complementary and alternative therapies, such as herbal treatments, exercise, relaxation, meditation exercises, and acupuncture are all possible solutions for depression. Be sure to initially address all areas of yourself: physical, mental, social, personal, and emotional. Then examine your relationships.

When you see a professional, share any other therapies you plan to seek. Interaction of herbs, supplements, and medication is a possibility. If you seek the help of alternative medicines, make sure they are authentic and consisting of quality. Also, your doctor may be able to offer advice about that particular alternative therapy.

Feel good again. Get “you” back, and get some tools with help from the professionals available to you. Take active steps to prevent slipping into depression again!

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