What Causes Depression?

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Understanding What Causes Depression

For a long list of physical health illnesses, there are simple tests to prove what the condition is without any doubt. Are you wondering about strep throat? Swab the throat and test it. Are you worried about diabetes? Test the blood sugar. Certainly, not every medical health condition is this simple, but it occurs frequently, especially when compared to mental health conditions.

With mental health conditions, there is no blood test to prove or disprove the presence of any diagnosis. A mental health professional cannot inspect the eyes and ears, check the reflexes, and listen with a stethoscope to identify a mental health disorder.

Instead, there is a focus on the assessment and evaluation of depression symptoms over time to arrive at a diagnostic conclusion.

Another difference between mental health and physical health is the ability to accurately state the cause of a condition. Do you have the chickenpox? You have a viral infection. Do you have bronchitis? You have an infection that led to the inflammation of your bronchial tubes.

Rarely in the world of mental health do diagnoses present in such a cause and effect way (with the exception being situational PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)). What about depression, though?

Despite its status as one of the most common mental health conditions, depression and its causes are not clear. Other explanations of the causes of depression may be overly simple.

Someone saying their depression is due to a “chemical imbalance” might be true, but leaves out what caused the chemical imbalance initially. Also, there is good evidence to support the idea that chemical changes in the brain are triggered by a range of influences including diet, sleep and exercise levels, so maybe “chemical imbalance” is limited.

The Role of Predisposition

Rather than thinking about depression in terms of cause and effect, think about the disorder in terms of a multidimensional interaction between factors pushing you towards the condition and factors that pull you away from it.

At the center of it all is you and your predisposition. Your predisposition is your vulnerability to depression from birth. It is influenced by hereditary factors, biology, and genetics.

For example, if there is a strong family history of depression or other mental health conditions, your genetic predisposition will be stronger. If no one in your family has had depression previously, your predisposition will be

weaker.

When looking through the family tree, it is important to look beyond depression diagnosis and treatment. The acceptance of mental health conditions is a relatively recent phenomenon as previous generations would ignore or cover up their symptoms.

It is possible that the history of alcoholism in your family is related to people self-medicating their depression. Because of this, you must investigate the symptoms throughout the years in a new way to gain information on your predisposition.

It is impossible to state how strong the influence of your genetic predisposition is on your depression. It will be different for each person — even siblings in the same family.

The Role of Risk Factors

The next part of the equation is risk factors. These are the features that push you towards depression.

Generally, these are negative and unwanted characteristics that you possess or negative and unwanted events you have experienced. These can begin even before you are born.

There are many risk factors and their weight varies depending on the frequency and intensity of their presentation.

Next page: common risk factors for depression.

The Role of Risk Factors

Some common risk factors include:

- **Parenting style.** There is good evidence to suggest that parenting styles and the relationships you have with your parents can influence depression. Overly strict, critical or lenient parents can trigger low self-esteem and worthlessness.
- **Exposure to violence, death and trauma.** Experiencing the death of a loved one, being in dangerous situations, and having your own life threatened are all risk factors that lead towards depression.
- **Mental, physical, sexual abuse and neglect.** Abuse is actively harming someone, while neglect is passively harming someone. Neglect might seem less damaging, but it can establish the expectation that the person being neglected has no value.
- **Alcohol and other drug use.** Alcohol and drug use can begin as a form of self-medication for established mental illnesses, but over time, it can change the structures in the brain and the way the brain functions, which leads to more depression.
- **Medical health issues.** Many long-term medical issues are related to increased mental health concerns like depression.
- **Chronic stress.** People with high levels of chronic stress may experience more frequent stressors due to their lifestyle, or they may lack the skills needed to resolve these in a desirable fashion. Either way, the greater the stress, the greater the risk of depression.

The Role of Protective Factors

The final part of the equation is protective factors. Protective factors are the opposite of risk factors; they subtract risk from the situation and pull you away from depression. Some common protective factors include:

- **The opposites.** Take a second look at each risk factor; by producing the opposite end of the spectrum, you will have a protective factor. Safety, stability, consistent parenting, desirable physical health, and using substances in moderation will all present as protective factors.

- **High self-worth.** If your self-esteem is poor, you will constantly find ways to blame yourself for the problems you experience.
- **Support from family and friends.** People with strong support will have opportunity to be connected to and learn from people with similar experiences.
- **Strong communication.** Having the ability to accurately, honestly and respectfully communicate your needs and wants to people in your life will aid in your ability to get what you want.
- **A sense of purpose.** People need a direction they are aiming towards. Otherwise, life does not change from one day to the next and stagnation develops.
- **Leisure activities.** Some of your activities should be just for fun. Having fun with yourself or with a combination of friends can do a lot to reduce stress and improve your overall well-being.

Finding the Solution

With the confusion and frustration depression and the causes of depression can trigger, the solution is surprisingly simple. To prevent and reduce depression, you must work to increase protective factors, decrease risk factors, and understand that the level of genetic predisposition is out of your hands and begin building acceptance of this fact.

Though simple, these tasks can prove overwhelming for someone to accomplish singlehandedly. If this is the case, be sure to explore options for mental health treatment. A therapist can provide more detailed, individualized information specific for your situation while expanding on your protective factors to yield the highest benefit.

In the end, there is no simple way to know what causes depression. For some it will be an overwhelming predisposition that triggers the condition. For others, it will be insurmountable risk factors or nonexistent protective factors that spark the initial depressive episode.

Some aspects of depression can be managed while others cannot. Even if you know the causes, you may not be able to stop the progression of depression into your life, but with proper treatment and a dose of optimism, you have a good chance to lessen it impact.