Why You Just Can’t Shake Off Depression

by LANA BARHUM

How Long Does a Depressive Episode Last?

There was a time when the consensus about depression involved telling people to “just get over it” or that it’s “all in your head.” Today, researchers and doctors know depression is a genuine condition that affects moods, emotions, and goes deeper than just feeling sad.

Depression brings the strongest person down to their knees and affects virtually every aspect of your life. Moreover, coping with depression without medical help is difficult, and most doctors warn you against doing this.

Some people are lucky and only experience depression once in their lives. Others will have some sporadic and short-lived reoccurrences, and there are others who will battle depression for their entire lives.

Depression can strike anyone regardless of their age, race, or financial status. Proper diagnosis and treatment play a key role in recovery, coping, and good outcomes.

Understanding Clinical Depression

Clinical depression is different and more severe than depression caused by a life event, such as the death of a loved one or other loss. That is not to say these events can’t eventually lead to clinical depression, but for most people, they are short-lived and less severe.

When diagnosing clinical depression, doctors rely on the criteria defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), a publication of the American Psychiatric Association. The DSM-5 criteria allow doctors to make a diagnosis of clinical depression based on a set of symptoms severe enough to cause problems in relationships and that affect daily life, which includes your job, school, and social life.

According to the National Institutes of Mental Health, in 2015, an estimated 16.1 million adults in the United States had at least one episode of clinical depression.

Clinical depression affects both adults and children. For many people, it can improve with antidepressant medication, psychological counseling or a combination of both.

What It Feels Like to Have a Depressive Episode: It Can Linger or Return

For most people, depression is a temporary thing and passes once feelings are expressed and resolved, either with medication, therapy or by addressing underlying causes. But depression doesn’t go away for everyone.

For those whose depression is recurrent, it is still possible for them to manage feelings, take care of themselves physically and emotionally, take medication and have good lives, all while managing depression. They may have periods where they feel good, feel less bad, or where they are falling apart emotionally.

For these people, depression never really goes away. Whether depression sticks around or not, it needs to be treated.

The fundamental goal of depression treatment is to secure a long-term positive outcome, and not just the treat symptoms for a short time. This does not mean that once depression is resolved, you won't ever feel sad or depressed again; it means depression does not have to control your life.

Does Depression Ever Go Away On Its Own?

Most depressed people recover, without or without treatment, because it is the nature of the disease. Depression comes and goes.

And yes, some people recover from depression on their own without talk therapy and/or medication. The people who do recover quickly and without medical help likely do so because they are less depressed.

Next page: Does depression ever go away on its own (cont.)? And ways to help yourself.

Does Depression Ever Go Away On Its Own?

The Research

One research study out of the Netherlands, reported in *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, looked at the progress of 250 people experiencing one episode of clinical depression, the majority of which were female and were experiencing an episode of recurrent depression. Recurrent depression refers to another depressive episode after recovery had previously been achieved.

Some of the patients in the Netherlands study sought treatments, and some did not. What the researchers found was most of the patients had recovered either completely or were experiencing few depressive symptoms, after three months, regardless of the treatment they did or did not receive.

The researchers concluded the people who recovered on their own did because they were less depressed and less incapacitated by depressive symptoms. And it is possible that the ones who sought help did so because they were more depressed and took longer to recover.

Depression Is Related to Underlying Factors

The bottom line is depression – at its core – is related to underlying factors, which need to be addressed for it to go away.

Doing proactive things, such as taking medications prescribed by your doctor, exercising, eating healthy, being social and expressing emotions in healthy ways, can reduce the intensity of depression and eventually, these symptoms may resolve.

And if your depression is related to specific situations, such as a stressful job or a troubling relationship, removing those factors from your life may also help in resolving depressive symptoms.

But depression does not just disappear on its own without serious effort or changes. In other words, you cannot just shake it off.

Recovery from severe depression requires a whole lot of willpower and effort. That is where the support of loved ones and a therapist is necessary and valuable to managing symptoms and hopefully, putting an end to them for good.

How Do You Help Yourself?

Recovery from depression can be a long process. You have a variety of treatment options for depression, but it will take time to notice some effect.

And while you and your doctor are trying to find the right treatment plan, depressive symptoms can worsen. Fortunately, there are things you can do to help yourself and relieve depressive symptoms in the meantime, and also to resolve depressive feelings should they return.

- **Be kind to yourself**. When people are depressed, it can be easy to think they shouldn't feel this way, or they can do something to change their mood or push through. Beating yourself up only makes you feel worse, so it is okay if you need to time to heal, or if you are not fun to be around, or even if you want to be left alone.
- **Baby steps**. Your depression isn't going to get better overnight, and there is nothing you can do to rush your recovery, so take it slow. If all you have the strength for today is to shower and sit on your couch, then do that, but tomorrow, try to enjoy a cup of tea on your front park, go for a walk the next day, and so on.
- **Get moving**. If can, try to squeeze some exercise into your day, as it does wonders for your mood. It does not need to be anything heavy duty, just take a walk to clear your head.
- **Stop telling yourself it's too hard**. Depression makes you want to fill the pain and emptiness with food, sleep, sex, work, alcohol or drugs. Stop telling yourself filling the void is the answer, or that getting better is too hard because you know what you need to do to move on; it is time to get your courage on.
- **Think positive thoughts**. Asking a depressed person to feel positive is like asking a colorblind person to see red or green. But sometimes, just saying to yourself something positive, such as "I am doing great," or "I feel fabulous," can make your experience with depression a little easier.

- **Write it down**. Describing how you feel can help you distance yourself from those emotions. Just start writing, and it is your choice if you want anyone to see what you have written.
- **Talk it out**. If you have a friend, who can listen to you vent, without offering advice or suggestions, ask them to be a sounding board. Sometimes, getting out those feelings can allow some of the negative emotions to pass, and it also makes you feel less alone.
- **Cry if you need to**. Crying doesn't mean you are giving up or that you are weak. Crying is very therapeutic because it allows you to let go of sadness, tension, and painful emotions.

The Takeaway

Depression is not something you can shake off, and it won't go away on its own. Untreated depression only gets worse with time.

Once you take the steps to get help, there is a good chance you will recover. But remember, recovery involves making changes, following through on treatment, and getting the necessary support so it doesn't return or becomes easier to manage should it come back.