Am I Depressed or Just Sad?

by BRITTANY DA SILVA

Am I Depressed?

Whether you have a history of depression or not, for some, it can be difficult to distinguish between depression and sadness.

Although there are similarities between both, it is important to keep this in mind: sadness is a perfectly normal human emotion that will pass, in due time. Depression, however, is a mental illness that stays with those affected for the rest of their lives.

Sadness is a symptom of depression, but depression is not a symptom of sadness; thus depression is the overarching mental illness, while sadness is simply an emotion.

Understanding Sadness

Some emotions are difficult to sit with, and sadness is definitely one of them. No one likes being sad.

Sadness is very uncomfortable, with many seeking relief by crying, venting or talking out their frustrations. This emotion is normal and is often triggered by an upsetting event, such as losing your job or the absence of a loved one.

Since a trigger of some kind usually causes sadness, these feelings of sadness often lift when that trigger has been resolved in some way. When you are hired at a new company or your loved one returns from being away for an extended period of time, it is also likely that the sadness you had felt before will also begin to lift.

Sadness is a temporary emotion, which is often resolved when the trigger is removed. If this uncomfortable sense of sadness persists, or perhaps is not connected to any specific trigger, it is possible that you can be experiencing feelings of sadness as a symptom of depression.

Depression vs. Sadness: Am I Depressed or Just Sad?

As previously stated, sadness is one of the major symptoms of depression, but depression and sadness are in no way interchangeable terms.

Unlike sadness, depression may or may not have a triggering event. This is because many factors may cause depression, including genetic, environmental and psychological factors.

If you are concerned that you may be depressed, rather than just sad, here is a list of depression symptoms to consider:

- Persistent sadness, anxiousness, or emptiness

- Irritability
- Losing interest in activities you normally enjoy
- Feelings of guilt, helplessness, hopelessness, or worthlessness
- Fatigue and having little to no energy
- Difficulties sleeping or insomnia
- Oversleeping
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Loss of appetite or over-eating
- Thoughts of suicide or self-harm
- Physical pain including, but not limited to headaches/migraines, cramps, and digestion issues

Getting a Diagnosis

There is no standard way to diagnose depression, but there are ways to rule it out as the cause of your symptoms. Blood work and other physical tests can assist in this process.

Occasionally, the signs and symptoms of depression may be as a result of a completely unrelated issue. Viral infections, thyroid disorder, and significant hormonal changes are just a few examples of illnesses that present with depression-like symptoms.

Doctors, therapists, and mental health professionals will often ask their patients to explain their mood, behavior, and activities in order to get a better understanding of their mental state. Many will also use questionnaires – such as the Beck Depression Inventory, Hamilton Depression Rating Scale, or the Zung Self-rating Scale for Depression – to gauge the severity of your depression.

Only a certified medical professional can diagnose depression, with many doctors referring their patients to psychiatrists for diagnosis, if possible. In order to get a depression diagnosis, individuals also have to present with at least five symptoms for two weeks or more.

Types of Depression

There is more than one kind of depression that can be diagnosed by a mental health professional. These variations include:

- Major Depressive Disorder (MDD)
- Major Depressive Disorder with Seasonal Patterns
- Postpartum Depression
- Atypical Depression
- Dysthymia
- Cyclothymia

Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), which is also known as clinical depression, is one of the most common mental disorders in the United States. Although the exact cause is unknown, there are some factors that can put you at a higher risk of developing MDD.

Both genes and stress can affect brain chemistry, which then reduces mood stability. Other triggers may lead to Major Depressive Disorder, including:

- Alcohol or drug abuse.
- Certain medical conditions, including cancer and hypothyroidism.
- Some medications, such as steroids.

Seeking Treatment for Depression

Despite the number of people affected by depression, there are plenty of people who are hesitant to receive

treatment for this all-too-common illness. As a result of the stigma that still surrounds mental health issues, there are many individuals who choose not to seek help.

It is important to keep in mind that requiring help in the treatment of your depression symptoms is not something to be ashamed of. Just as you would seek medical help for a physical problem or ailment, so should you with your mental health.

There are many options for those who are brave enough to get treatment for their depression. A mental health professional – like a psychologist, psychiatrist or social worker – can help you begin your journey to mental wellness.

Treatment Options

Depression is commonly treated using a combination of medication, lifestyle recommendations, and psychotherapy. Antidepressants used in combination with therapy are a common form of treatment for many mental health issues, including depression.

Specifically, in the treatment of depression, there are lifestyle changes that can make a difference in your ability to manage your depression on a daily basis. Exercise, stress management techniques and dietary changes can all ease the symptoms of depression and make it easier to manage.

Understanding Your Depression

Some people are predisposed to depression, while in others, it may be triggered by a life event or situation. There are also those who experience the symptoms of depression, without the ability to identify any specific cause.

It is okay to be honest with yourself and those around you in admitting that you don’t know the cause of your depression. No matter what led to your diagnosis, depression is manageable through treatment.

If you have been experiencing any symptoms of depression for more than two weeks, contact a mental health professional in your area. Those feelings of sadness do not have to last forever, and you can look forward to a bright future by taking your first step towards treatment.