What Depression Is, and What Depression Isn’t

by ERIC PATTERSON

What Is Depression?

Depression is a multifaceted and complex mental health condition many experience every day. Although people think they have a complete understanding of the condition based on books, TV or personal experience, they may be misinformed.

With numerous myths and misunderstandings regarding depression that exist, confusion seems to grow. Because of this, it is essential to gather the best information from trusted sources to help yourself or your loved ones conquer the condition.

Understanding Depression

To limit the uncertainty about depression, don’t think of it as just one thing. Think of it as a group of unwanted symptoms that affect someone’s thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

There are nine possible symptoms at the root of depression. Therapists and other mental health professionals will investigate the presence of these symptoms, in order to make a diagnosis.

Someone with depression may display:

- A depressed or irritable mood
- Lower interest or pleasure in activities that were previously enjoyable
- Appetite changes or significant weight loss or weight gain without trying
- Poor sleep marked by sleeping too much or too little on a daily basis
- Feeling or appearing very sped up or slowed down
- Feeling tired and fatigued with loss of energy
- Feeling excessively guilty or worthless
- Decreased ability to concentrate, think, or make decisions
- Frequently thinking about death or suicide

These nine symptoms are linked to just one type of depressive condition called major depressive disorder. People may experience depressive symptoms linked to other mood disorders like:

- Bipolar disorders
- Persistent depressive disorder
- Disruptive mood dysregulation disorder
- Premenstrual dysphoric disorder
- Schizoaffective disorder
- Substance use disorders

It is important to note that this condition is not a normal part of life. Even though all people get sad from time to time, not all people become depressed.

What Can Depression Do?

Regardless of the specific condition the depression takes, the outcomes may become devastating. A sufferer may begin to struggle through all components in their life with:

- Decreased performance at work or school
- Increased conflict with loved ones and coworkers
- Lower interest in building new or maintaining current relationships
- Poor motivation to maintain household responsibilities and chores
- Increased desire to use alcohol and other drugs as a form of self-medication
- Failing to follow through on promises

Depression can completely distort every thought and sensation a person has. The condition can turn a genuine compliment from a trusted support, into a negative piece of judgmental criticism. It can create physical pain and distress when robbing the person of all energy and ambition.

In some cases, depression can make a person think that life is awful with no chance of improving. These people may feel hopeless, idealize death, and attempt or complete suicide.

Causes and Triggers

Depression does not have a single cause. Instead, there are a number of factors contributing to the condition being expressed.

Consider the idea that every person has some predisposition to depression. Based on your genes and family history, your predisposition could be high if many family members have had symptoms, or low if there is no family history.

On top of the genetic predisposition, there are environmental factors that influence depression. Possible environment influences include:

- Poor home environment with lack of safety
- Poor educational success
- Limited supports
- Seeing or experiencing violence, abuse or neglect
- Experiencing a traumatic event
- Inconsistent or unstable childhood

When the environmental issues and genetics combine and become too great, the depression emerges. If the environmental issues and genetic factors are low, the depression stays hidden.

Protective factors are other contributing factors to this condition. People with many protective factors have a lower chance of depression, because these act as a buffer to absorb the unwanted environmental influences.

Possible protective factors include:

- A loving and consistent family
- Academic success
- Stable socioeconomic status
- Supportive peers
- Healthy coping skills to manage stress

Treatments

Depression is a serious problem for many, but the condition can create a range of symptoms with various intensities. Some can manage their symptoms at home, while others need the professional interventions of a mental health clinician.

Treatments for depression usually belong to one of two categories:

- **Medication management**: involves the use of prescription medications to modify the chemicals in the brain to lessen depression. Psychiatrists, nurse practitioners and primary care doctors may offer this treatment.
- **Therapy**: involves regular meetings with a social worker, psychologist or counselor to talk about depression and healthy coping skills, to better understand and address the issue. Different therapists will use a variety of theoretical orientations and treatment styles to improve symptoms.

Some people prefer to use only medication or only therapy to treat their depression, but there is good evidence to suggest that combining the two forms of treatment produces better results. If you notice the symptoms of depression in your life and you can identify possible causes, make sure to consult with a mental health professional to get the treatment you deserve.