Is Depression Hereditary?

by ERIC PATTERSON

Family History and Depression

Your mom has depression. So does your aunt and your grandma on your dad’s side. You have seen the unwanted influence that depression has on their relationships, work and home life. Naturally, you want to know what the odds are of you having depression and ways to prevent it if possible. So, is depression hereditary?

The Bad News

There is no way to tell if you will meet criteria to be diagnosed with depression now or at some point in the future. Since the beginning of studies on depression, researchers have searched for the source of symptoms. Some believe genetics is the cause while others think environment creates depression. This debate is known as "nature versus nurture."

There is good evidence that people with a family history of mental illness like depression are more likely to also have depression. This supports the nature side of the argument. On the other hand, people with depression can come from families without any mental health problems. These people’s symptoms may have been triggered by environmental cues like a poor childhood, a traumatic event or another negative experience. This supports the nurture view.

While both sides have credence, they are both limited. Rather than viewing it as nature versus nurture, think about the source of depression in terms of nature AND nurture. Each person is born with a certain genetic predisposition to mental illness. If the level of predisposition is high, very few environmental triggers need to occur for the depression to present. If the predisposition is low, high levels of negative environmental events must occur. As mentioned earlier, there is no way to measure the predisposition or to know the impact of negative life experiences.

The Good News

However, there are ways to practice prevention that are free from risks and harmful side effects. These measures work well for those with and without depression alike.

- **Care for your body –** Your physical health has a direct link to your mental health. For thousands of years people knew that a healthy body was beneficial for a healthy mind. Track your diet and sleep. Make healthy choices that make sense for you. Avoid fad diets and exercise programs and seek out a healthy lifestyle built on moderation and sustainability.
- **Exercise –** This is clearly another way to care for your body, but its impact is so crucial that it deserves its own spot. Exercise is safe, readily available and often free. People who begin a simple walking program three times a week report similar effects to others on an antidepressant medication. If your mood is already good, exercise will make it better by releasing pleasurable neurotransmitters into your system. A little exercise goes a long way.

- **Care for your mind –** It is true that you cannot avoid depression totally, but finding ways to build optimism, improve self-esteem, communicate assertively and expand your healthy coping skills makes you a more resilient, well-rounded person. Preventative measures like these will make any future issues with depression more manageable and less destructive.

Conclusion

Expect the nature versus nurture debate to rage on indefinitely. In the meantime, practice a little prevention to limit your environmental stressors. Eat well, sleep well, exercise and care for your mind. Prevention today leads to preparedness tomorrow.