Recognize the Signs and Symptoms of Depression

by BRITTANY DA SILVA

5 Depression Symptoms You Shouldn't Ignore

Depression is not just a feeling or a state of mind. More commonly referred to as major depressive disorder or clinical depression in the medical community, depression is a mood disorder that affects how you think, feel, and behave.

Sadness is Not Depression

Blurring the lines between depression and sadness is often damaging to those who are suffering from major depressive disorder. The most recognizable symptom of depression may be sadness, but that one similarity does not equate the two.

Sadness is a painful and difficult emotion to feel, however, treating depression the same as sadness minimizes the illness.

Think about it this way: when someone you love is sad, you expect that at some point, the sadness will pass and your loved one will get over it. In the meantime, you will do whatever you can to cheer them up, make them forget about what's upsetting them, or offer a shoulder to cry on.

Depression is much more than just sadness. If you expect that at some point your loved one's depression will just go away – it won't.

Treating depression like sadness is dangerous, as it confuses an illness with a symptom. When we expect people to get over depression similarly to how they overcome sadness, we set them up for failure.

An individual who remains depressed over an extended period of time is suddenly thought of as lazy and unmotivated, as we begin to lose patience over their ongoing bout of "sadness." We blame the person for not trying hard enough, rather than blaming the illness itself.

As someone who has depression, how many times have you heard the following?

- What is there to be depressed about?
- Just think of something else.
- Smile! It's not that bad.
- It's all in your head.
- You should be grateful.
- Happiness is a choice.
- There are plenty of people who are worse off than you.
- Just get over it.

These platitudes are often spoken by those who incorrectly use “depression” and “sadness” as interchangeable terms.

Symptoms of Depression

Depression is a mood disorder that can affect you in a multitude of different ways. With both emotional and physical symptoms to deal with, depression can make it difficult to lead a normal life.

To be diagnosed with clinical depression, you need to experience some or all of the following depression symptoms for at least two weeks. If you identify with one or more of these symptoms, contact your doctor for more information and next steps.

Next page: The most common depression symptoms in adults.

What Are the Symptoms of Depression?

Emotional Symptoms of Depression

The psychological symptoms of depression are often the symptoms that are mistakenly used in place of the illness itself, as explained above with sadness.

The most common emotional symptoms of major depressive disorder include, but are not limited to:

- Feelings of sadness, tearfulness, emptiness, or hopelessness.
- Angry outbursts, irritability, or frustration.
- Anxiety, worry, or fear.
- Loss of interest or pleasure in most or all normal activities (like sex, hobbies, or sports).
- Feelings of worthlessness, helplessness, guilt, and self-blame.
- Trouble thinking, concentrating, making decisions, and remembering.
- Frequent or recurrent thoughts of death or suicide.

Cognitive symptoms that involve negative or distorted thinking are prevalent in depression, while feelings of sadness are not always present in each case. In some cases, people experience anhedonia rather than sadness.

Anhedonia is described as the inability to feel pleasure, especially when partaking in activities usually found enjoyable. Feelings of numbness and emptiness are also commonly expressed by many people with depression.

Physical Symptoms of Depression

The physical symptoms of depression are not quite as well recognized as the emotional symptoms, although they can be just as debilitating, if not more so.

The most common physical symptoms of major depressive disorder include, but are not limited to:

- Sleep disturbances, ranging from insomnia to oversleeping
- Tiredness, fatigue, and exhaustion
- Headaches and migraines
- Reduced appetite with weight loss or increased appetite with weight gain
- Stomach pains and digestion issues
- Agitation or restlessness
- Slowed thinking, speaking, or movements
- Chest and back pain
- Unexplained physical issues, like back pain or headaches

It is important to pay attention to all of the depression symptoms that you experience, whether you believe they are connected to your depression or not. By focusing on the mental symptoms that are strongly correlated with depression is essentially ignoring everything that your body is physically trying to tell you.

There is often a connection between the mental and physical symptoms of depression. It is often the physical symptoms that are difficult or even impossible to ignore, forcing action on those who would otherwise ignore their body's warning signs.

How Depression Can Make You Physically Sick

Major depressive disorder takes a significant mental toll on a person, making it difficult to perform the functions of daily living. It is only logical to assume that your body will have a physical response to that level of stress.

For many people, it is when the physical symptoms of depression appear that they decide to take action. Surprisingly, major depressive disorder is underdiagnosed in a primary care setting, but this is precisely where most people turn to when they present with physical symptoms.

The mental or emotional symptoms of depression often present first, but many people ignore these initial feelings and don't seek medical treatment for the thoughts that they are having.

Depressed patients frequently present with a combination of both emotional and physical symptoms.

A recent international study discovered that approximately 70 percent of depressed patients stated that the only reason why they finally decided to visit their doctor was as a result of the physical symptoms that they were dealing with.

Cardiovascular and Immune System Issues

As depression has a strong correlation to stress, many of the risk factors of long-term exposure to stress are closely related to depression.

When stress hormones are racing through your body, it speeds up your heart rate and makes your blood vessels tighten. This physical reaction to stress keeps your body in a prolonged state of emergency and can be dangerous if left untreated.

Over an extended period of time, this constant exposure to stress hormones can lead to heart disease. Depression is closely linked to the recurrence of cardiovascular problems.

Cardiovascular issues are more common in those with depression than those who have diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and who smoke cigarettes. If left untreated, depression increases your risk of dying after a heart attack.

There are also studies that suggest that depression and stress have a negative impact on the immune system. Once your immune system has been compromised, you will be left vulnerable to many infections and diseases.

Depression and Digestion

Major depressive disorder often has a drastic effect on appetite, nutrition, and digestion. Issues related to appetite and eating vary significantly among those who are depressed.

Some individuals suffer from a loss of appetite due to depression and find it very difficult to eat anything. This makes it very difficult for those affected to consume the correct amount of nutritious foods, causing them to lose weight and diminishing their overall physical well-being.

Others have the opposite issue, as they find the only way to cope with their depression is to eat. Some people

who find comfort in food goes too far, partaking in overeating or bingeing, thus increasing their chances of developing obesity-related diseases, including type 2 diabetes.

Whether affected by an increased appetite or the complete loss of appetite, the poor eating habits connected to depression can lead to physical issues like stomach aches, cramping, constipation, and malnutrition. Maintaining a healthy and balanced diet plays an important role in managing and coping with depression.

How many depression symptoms did you identify with? Five or more over a two-week period points towards major depressive disorder.

Next page: How adults are affected by depression and how to cope with the symptoms of depression.

How Depression Affects Older Adults

Depression has a profound effect on the central nervous system. Unfortunately, many of these depression symptoms are ignored by those experiencing them.

In older adults, symptoms of depression can be overlooked, just because they believe their symptoms are related to the aging process, rather than major depressive disorder.

Older adults may experience issues related to memory loss, slow reaction time, difficulties performing everyday activities, chronic fatigue, trouble sleeping at night, irritability, body aches and pains, feelings of loneliness, loss of interest in pleasurable activities, inability to concentrate, and difficulty making decisions.

Many medical ailments also share these common symptoms, so it is important to share everything that you are experiencing with your doctor. In addition to depression, Alzheimer's disease, epilepsy, and multiple sclerosis have similar warning signs.

Symptoms such as these cannot simply be passed off as "getting older," as all of these are common complaints had by those suffering from depression. Rather than ignoring what your body is trying to tell you, make an appointment with your doctor to thoroughly explore all of the symptoms that you have been feeling in the past few months.

Coping with Depression Symptoms

There are many small changes that you can begin to introduce to your daily life to cope with the symptoms of depression.

Recognize Your Triggers

First and foremost, it is essential to recognize the sources of stress in your life and minimize them as much as possible. Although small amounts of stress are mostly unavoidable, you should not feel like you are at the end of your rope on a daily basis.

If there is anything that you can do to lessen the number of responsibilities on your plate, you owe it to yourself to do so. You will feel healthier and better able to take on the projects that you are left with.

Writing for Stress Relief

Many people find it soothing to get their thoughts and feelings down on paper. If you don't feel comfortable opening up to someone else, writing can offer you an outlet in which to express your deepest, darkest fears.

Writing has been proven to be a useful stress management tool by allowing you to be open and vulnerable, without the fear of rejection you may feel when talking to another person. Try to be completely honest when you

write, releasing any of the bottled feelings or emotions that have been causing you pain and suffering.

If you suffer from confusion and trouble concentrating as a result of your depression, writing your ideas down can also be an effective way of recording your day. If you find it useful to give yourself a set of tasks or tend to forget about appointments the moment you make them, try using a planner or agenda to help you organize your life.

Develop a Routine

Sticking to the schedules that you create for yourself will also help you maintain a routine, which is very helpful in maintaining your motivation. Avoid feeling unproductive by scheduling at least one enjoyable activity per day and keep a sense of balance in your life.

Relaxation Techniques

Sometimes just practicing activities like mindfulness, yoga, meditation and breathing exercises can help manage your depression, stress and even anxiety.

Relaxation techniques can help slow down the mind, boost overall mood, and allow the muscles to relax. The main focus of relaxation techniques is to help manage the "flight" response – the one that is common in many people with depression and anxiety, or who feel stuck or withdrawn.

Whichever relaxation technique you use is up to you, there is no right or wrong choice – you can either incorporate one technique into your coping strategy or add all of them to your coping toolbox.

Treating Major Depressive Disorder

Although the treatment of major depressive disorder may be a lengthy process, it is one you should take. You are worth the effort, and you will feel much better after having taken the time to do so.

Therapy

Working with a therapist is an integral part of managing your depression, as they will teach you the tools that you need to manage and minimize the stress in your daily life. A therapist can offer you an objective opinion on the issues that you are facing and can provide actionable advice on how to tackle them.

Whether with a psychiatrist or a therapist, there are proven benefits to CBT, or Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, in the treatment of depression. CBT can offer you the tools and skills necessary to retrain your brain and learn to cope with the emotional symptoms of depression.

Medication

Anti-depressants and other medications are important in the treatment of depression for many people, but they are not for everyone. Medications must be discussed in detail with your doctor to discover if they may be an option for you.

Support Groups

If you are feeling stuck or isolated because of your depression, there is no reason to hesitate to talk to trusted family members or friends, or seek a depression support group – online or in-person.

While you may think sometimes that asking for help is a sign of weakness, it's important to know that reaching out doesn't mean you’re a burden to others. These family members, friends and support groups are there to help you by listening to your troubles, provide practical advice (i.e., coping skills), and a shoulder to even cry on.

What Causes Depression?

The truth is, no one in the medical community knows for certain what causes depression. In some cases, people experience depression while suffering from another serious medical illness or undergoing a significant life change, like the death of a loved one or a major move.

There is a possible hereditary component to depression, as some people have a family history of the disease. In these cases, there may be no known cause or reason behind the onset of their depression.

Although the cause of depression is unclear, many factors are known to increase one's risk of developing depression, including:

- Past physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- Medications, such as isotretinoin, interferon-alpha, and corticosteroids
- Personal conflicts with family or friends
- Death or the loss of a loved one
- Genetics or a family history of depression
- Major life events, whether positive or negative
- Personal problems, such as social isolation
- Serious medical illnesses
- Substance abuse

Overall, depression is a complex mental illness with a multitude of contributing factors. If you notice any emotional or physical symptoms of depression in yourself or a loved one, please don't wait and get help right away.

Seeking treatment or help as soon as possible can help make living with depression a little easier. Just remember this: you are worth the effort and you deserve to live a life without depression overlooking your everyday life. So don't give up on yourself or a loved one who is experiencing depression.