



PSYCH NOTES™

Courtesy of

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MAJOR DEPRESSION *

What is major depression?

Major depression is a serious medical illness affecting 9.9 million American adults, or approximately 5 percent of the adult population in a given year. Unlike normal emotional experiences of sadness, loss, or passing mood states, major depression is persistent and can significantly interfere with an individual's thoughts, behavior, mood, activity, and physical health. Among all medical illnesses, major depression is the leading cause of disability in the U.S. and many other developed countries.

More than twice as many women (6.7 million) as men (3.2 million) suffer from major depressive disorder each year. Major depression can occur at any age including childhood, the teenage years and adulthood. If untreated, episodes commonly last anywhere from six months to a year. Left untreated, depression can lead to suicide.

What are the symptoms of major depression?

The onset of the first episode of major depression may not be obvious if it is gradual or mild. The symptoms of major depression characteristically represent a significant change from how a person functioned before the illness. The symptoms of depression include:

- persistently sad or irritable mood,
- pronounced changes in sleep, appetite, and energy,
- difficulty thinking, concentrating, and remembering,
- physical slowing or agitation,
- lack of interest in or pleasure from activities that were once enjoyed,
- feelings of guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness, and emptiness,
- recurrent thoughts of death or suicide and,
- persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain.

When several of these symptoms of depressive disorder occur at the same time, last longer than two weeks, and interfere with ordinary functioning, professional treatment is needed.

What are the causes of major depression?

There is no single cause of major depression. Psychological, biological, and environmental factors may all contribute to its development. Whatever the specific causes of depression, scientific research has firmly established that major depression is a biological brain disorder.

Scientists have also found evidence of a genetic predisposition to major depression. There is an increased risk for developing depression when there is a family history of the illness. Not everyone with a genetic predisposition develops depression, but some people probably have a biological make-up that leaves them particularly vulnerable to developing depression. Life events, such as the death of a loved one, a major loss or change, chronic stress, and alcohol

and drug abuse, may trigger episodes of depression. Some illnesses such as heart disease and cancer and some medications may also trigger depressive episodes. It is also important to note that many depressive episodes occur spontaneously and are not triggered by a life crisis, physical illness, or other risks.

How is major depression treated?

Although major depression can be a devastating illness, it is highly treatable. Between 80 and 90 percent of those suffering from serious depression can be effectively treated and return to their normal daily activities and feelings. Many types of treatment are available, and the type chosen depends on the individual and the severity and patterns of his or her illness. Primary treatment for depression includes psychotherapy and medication. Research has shown that mild to moderate depression can often be treated successfully with either of these therapies used alone. However, more severe depression appears to respond to a combination of psychotherapy and medication.

What are the side effects of the medications used to treat depression?

All medications have side effects. Different medications produce different side effects, and people differ in the amount and severity of side effects they experience. About 50 percent of people who take antidepressant medications have some side effects during the first weeks of treatment, but these problems are usually temporary and mild. Side effects that are particularly bothersome can often be treated by changing the dose of the medication, switching to a different medication, or treating the side effect directly with an additional medication. Again, it is important to note that severe depression appears more likely to respond to a combination of psychotherapy and medication.

What types of psychotherapy are used to treat depression?

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) focuses on changing negative thinking and unsatisfying behavior associated with depression, while teaching people how to unlearn the behavioral patterns that contribute to their illness. Treatment may also focus on improving troubled personal relationships and on adapting to new life roles that could be associated with a person's depression.

* Adapted from NAMI

East End Psychological Services, P.C. (E.E.P.S.) offers help for issues associated with AD/HD, ODD, anxiety including traumatic stress, and depression experienced by people of all ages. Please feel free to contact Dr. Volpe, Clinical Director, at (631) 821-7214 for more information.

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