

## *Depression*

The term "depression" is often used to describe a very normal emotion that passes quickly. Everyone feels "down," "blue," or sad occasionally. But major depression is a "whole-body" illness, affecting the way a person eats, sleeps, and feels about one's self. It is not a passing sad mood. People with major depression often feel sad, helpless, hopeless, and irritable. Although it is perfectly normal to experience these feelings occasionally, people suffering from clinical depression cannot simply "snap out of it." It is the persistence and severity of these emotions that distinguishes clinical depression from normal mood changes.

The term "clinical depression" means the depression is severe enough to require treatment. Types of clinical depression include major depression, dysthymia (persistent mild depression), bipolar disorder, and seasonal affective disorder. Depression usually begins in adolescence or early adulthood. It is often not recognized, and thus people who have it may suffer for years without proper diagnosis or treatment.

People with depression often suffer from the following symptoms:

- noticeable change of appetite; significant weight loss or gain
- noticeable change in sleeping patterns, such as fitful sleep, inability to sleep, early morning awakening, or sleeping too much
- loss of interest and pleasure in activities formerly enjoyed
- loss of energy; fatigue
- feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness
- feelings of inappropriate guilt
- inability to concentrate
- recurring thoughts of death or suicide
- physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomachaches

Not everyone who is depressed experiences every symptom. Symptoms and their severity vary with each individual case of depression. The highest rates of depressive disorders are found among those aged 24-44, and the rate of clinical depression for women is about double that of men. Studies show that depression underlies the majority of suicides, is the eighth leading cause of death, and is the third leading cause of death among people aged 15-24. One of the best strategies for preventing suicide is the early recognition and treatment of depression.

Although the exact mechanism that triggers depression is not known, a serious loss, chronic illness, difficult relationship, financial problems, or any unwelcome change in life patterns can trigger a depressive episode. Also, people with a family history of depression are generally at higher risk.

Depression is easily treated. Between 80 and 90 percent of all depressed people respond to treatment and nearly all depressed people who receive treatment see at least some relief from their symptoms. Mental health professionals agree that severely depressed patients do best with a combination of psychotherapy and medication. Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months, or years.

*For more information or assistance:*

*USF students may call 974-2831;*

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