

## How to: Understand depression

It's normal to feel sad, discouraged, or depressed, especially when faced with stressful situations or difficult events. However, depression is only considered to be present, if certain symptoms persist for at least two weeks and prevent you from doing the things you usually do for pleasure. Like medical illnesses, depression has its causes, symptoms and treatments.

Depression is a serious illness that affects all stages of life, and all social and professional categories. It's estimated that one in five people has suffered, or will suffer from depression in his or her lifetime.

Being sad is not the same as having depression, this is often confused. Sadness is a moment of "blues" or discouragement, whilst depression is associated with daily low mood, loss of interest or pleasure, and withdrawal. Depression can lead to social dysfunction, which in turn can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems, and decrease your ability to function at home and at work.

### Criteria for depression

Not all people with depression have the same symptoms. A diagnosis is usually made when a person has a **depressed mood** or a **loss of interest or pleasure** associated with **at least 5 other symptoms** (below), for **at least two weeks**.

### Symptoms can be

Feeling sad or having a low mood	Loss of interest or pleasure in daily activities, even those usually enjoyed
Agitation or psychomotor slowdown almost every day, also noticed by friends and family	Thoughts of death (not just fear of dying), recurrent suicidal thoughts with or without a specific plan or suicide attempt, sometimes specific suicidal projects
Fatigue or loss of energy almost daily.	Loss or increase of appetite, loss or significant weight gain in the absence of diet
Sleep disorders: insomnia, hypersomnia, early morning waking.	Attention, concentration and memory disorders in most people affected almost daily

## Risk factors

Although depression is one of the most common mental disorders, it is quite misunderstood. It sometimes results from a combination of different causes: life situations and events (death, job loss, separation...), and early trauma during childhood. Nevertheless, not all people exposed to these types of events develop the disease.

**Genetic vulnerability:** an individual is 2 to 4 times more likely to have a depressive episode in his/her lifetime when one of his/her parents has a history of depressive disorder.

**Neurobiological factors:** a defect or an imbalance in the glutamate/GABA balance and a deficit in the regulation of the chronic stress response system are believed to be elements that favour a depressive disorder.

## Post-partum depression

Pregnancy and the months following birth are a period during which emotional and hormonal upheaval can lead to the onset of depression. Its manifestations are often wrongly attributed to fatigue.

Anxiety, crying, feelings of incapacity, guilt, associated with significant emotional variation, suffering and the repercussions of symptoms are characteristic of perinatal depression.

What is called the *baby blues* is common as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> day after delivery, but it is brief, fluctuating and resolves on its own within 10 to 15 days after birth. It is to be distinguished from true postpartum depression, which can alter the early relationship between mother and child, or even threaten the infant's good health and safety.

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## Treating Depression

### Treatments

Depression is a real illness, is one of the most treatable mental disorders and help is available. With proper diagnosis and treatment, the vast majority of people with depression will respond well to treatment.

If you are experiencing symptoms of depression, a first step is to see your family physician or psychiatrist for an evaluation.

Psychotherapy is usually **recommended for the treatments of all depressive episodes**

Effective drug treatments exist, and can improve or control most depressive episodes. Antidepressants should be taken regularly, but their effectiveness is not immediate: improvement of symptoms is most often observed after a minimum of 2 to 4 weeks of treatment.

### Self-help

There are a number of things you can do to help reduce the symptoms of depression. Regular exercise helps create positive feeling and improve your mood, getting good quality sleep, eating a healthy diet and avoiding alcohol (a depressant) can help reduce symptoms of depression.

### Friends and family

Depression is a significant psychological burden for loved ones, and often has consequences for family and social functioning. Often, family members think that the person is responsible for their disorder and that they are not involved in his/her recovery.

However, as in any illness, the person in depression needs to be understood and supported by his/her loved ones. This does not substitute professional health care or medical recommendations, but being present and listening is enough to help the person feel less alone and contribute to his healing process.