

What is Dysthymia?

Dysthymia (the Greek roots of the word mean “bad state of mind” or “ill humor”) is a disorder with similar but longer-lasting and milder symptoms than clinical depression. By the standard psychiatric definition, this disorder lasts for at least two years, but is less disabling than major depression; for example, victims are usually able to go on working and do not need to be hospitalized.

How Common Is It?

About three percent of the population will suffer from dysthymia at some time - a rate slightly lower than the rate of major depression. Like major depression, dysthymia occurs twice as often in women as it does in men. It is also more common among the poor and the unmarried. The symptoms usually appear in adolescence or young adulthood but in some cases do not emerge until middle age.

Warning Signs

- Poor school/work performance
- Social withdrawal
- Shyness
- Irritable hostility
- Conflicts with family and friends
- Physiological abnormalities
- Sleep irregularities
- Parents with major depression

At least three-quarters of people with dysthymia have some other psychiatric or medical disorder as well.

Current Treatments for Dysthymia

Therapy: Psychotherapy or cognitive therapy (also known as “talk therapy”) is used to alter people’s self-defeating thoughts. Behavioral therapy may help people learn how to act in a more “positive approach” to life and to communicate better with friends, family, and co-workers.

Medications: Tricyclic antidepressants, the standard treatment for major depression, may be useful for dysthymia

In many cases, the symptoms are hard to recognize and classify, and the response to treatment is unpredictable. Most people with dysthymia see only their family doctor, who may misdiagnose them, especially if the main complaints are physical. Many people do not think of themselves as depressed, and are relieved to be told they have a treatable illness. Unfortunately, mental health professionals are usually consulted only when major depression develops, although dysthymia alone may lead to alcoholism or suicide. Even when it is recognized, dysthymia is difficult to treat. The longer a depression lasts the slower the recovery.

Source: Mental Health America. Last updated: 11/08/2006.