

Depression: What women need to know

Learn to recognize clinical depression

Does this sound familiar?

- “Even though I was always tired, I kept waking up early in the morning. And, I completely lost my appetite. Everyone irritated me: people at work, my husband and my kids.”
- “For weeks, I was always on the verge of tears. I thought I had fallen into a black hole I couldn’t get out of. Was I going to feel this way forever?”
- “My family and friends noticed that I just wasn’t myself anymore. I didn’t enjoy the things I used to – playing golf, going out, even having sex. It became so difficult to concentrate at work that I felt worthless, like I couldn’t do anything well.”

Approximately one in five women can expect to develop clinical depression in their lifetime. Regardless of age, race or income, clinical depression can occur in any woman. Depression robs women of the pleasure found in daily life. Untreated, it can worsen existing illness and lead to feelings of giving up on life.

Clinical depression is not a “normal” part of being a woman

Despite the number of women who experience clinical depression, it is, in fact, not a “female weakness” or simply a routine part of being a woman. Women with clinical depression need to know that they are suffering from a real illness that requires treatment. The good news is that depression is very treatable and that many effective treatments are available. More than 80% of people with depression can be treated successfully with medication or psychotherapy, or a combination of both.

Clinical depression is more than the blues

Clinical depression is not just “the blues,” which we all experience now and then. It is expected that we would feel sadness or upset at times because of the death of a loved one, a divorce or in times of illness. Too much work or troubles at home can be stressful, but most women can get through these difficult times without becoming clinically depressed.

Some people incorrectly believe that only those who have experienced depression for months, or who have completely lost their ability to function, have clinical depression.

In fact, when the symptoms of depression last more than two weeks, or when the symptoms are severe enough to interfere with daily life, you may have clinical depression.

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Women are more than twice as likely as men to experience clinical depression

Although the reasons for this difference are not known, research suggests that biological differences in women – such as hormonal changes and genetics – may contribute to depression. Premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD) and post-partum depression (PPD) are two forms of depression in women that are directly related to hormonal changes. A woman's menstrual cycle or the birth of a child may lead to depression. Increased stresses from work and family responsibilities, the roles and expectations of women, and even the increased rates of sexual abuse and poverty among women, may also contribute to depression.

What are the causes of clinical depression?

In addition to gender, many things can contribute to clinical depression. For some people, a number of factors seem to be involved, while for others a single factor can cause the illness. Some people become depressed for no apparent reason. Regardless of the factors involved, clinical depression needs to be diagnosed and treated. Things that may contribute to depression include:

- Medications. Some medications can produce a depressed mood. Check with your health care provider regarding medications (prescription and over-the-counter) you may be taking and their possible interactions.
- Chemical changes in the brain.
- Birth of a child. Between 10 and 20 percent of women develop some form of depression called post-partum depression, for up to a year following the birth of a child.
- Difficult life events, such as divorce, financial problems, moving, death of a loved one and job loss.
- Presence of other illnesses. Hormonal disorders, cancer, diabetes, stroke, heart disease, Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's disease can increase the likelihood of developing depression.
- Presence of other mental illness, such as anxiety or eating disorders.
- Abuse of alcohol or drugs. Some people attempt to "self-medicate" to stop the emotional pain caused by depression by using alcohol and/or drugs but, unfortunately, this will worsen depression.

Clinical depression can be successfully treated

Clinical depression is one of the most treatable of all illnesses. In fact, more than 80% of people with depression can be treated successfully with medication or psychotherapy, or a combination of both. As with many illnesses, if treatment is needed, the earlier it begins, the sooner relief can be found.

You cannot treat clinical depression on your own

Some people are embarrassed to get help for depression, or are reluctant to talk about how they are feeling. Others believe that depression will simply go away on its own, and that they should just "tough it out." Such views are simply wrong. Like any other illness, clinical depression requires professional treatment. Talking to friends, family members and clergy can often give people the support they need when they are going through life's difficulties.

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However, for those with clinical depression, such support is no substitute for treatment. Clinical depression is a serious illness that you cannot treat on your own. Sometimes people try to “self-medicate” with alcohol, anti-anxiety medications or other drugs. This can complicate the depression, and possibly to an additional, co-occurring substance abuse problem.

You may need to help the women you care about

The nature of clinical depression often makes it difficult for a person experiencing depression to find the motivation or energy to seek treatment. This means that friends and family need to help, not only by expressing their concern but also by helping a woman suffering from depression to seek treatment. In fact, depression can even cause confusion and withdrawal, so it may be helpful for family or friends to accompany the woman who may have depression for a health care evaluation. The role of family and friends is even more important if the depressed woman is expressing thoughts of suicide. Family and friends should take all talk of suicide seriously.

There are treatments for clinical depression

The most common ways to treat clinical depression are antidepressant medication or psychotherapy, or a combination of the two. The choice of treatment depends on how severe the depressive symptoms are, history of the illness and patient preference. When you talk to your doctor or mental health professional, make sure he or she tells you about these treatment options. Recent research strongly supports the use of medication for the most severe episodes of clinical depression.

Antidepressant medication acts on chemical pathways of the brain related to mood. There are many effective antidepressants. The two most common types are selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs). Other new types of antidepressants (e.g., alpha-2 antagonists, selective norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) and aminoketones), and older class, monoamine inhibitors (MAOIs), may also be prescribed.

Antidepressant medications are not habit-forming. Although some symptoms, such as insomnia, often improve within a week or two, it may take three or four weeks before you feel better. **The full benefit of medication may require six to eight weeks of treatment.**

Sometimes changes need to be made in medication dosage or medication type before improvements are noticed. It is usually recommended that medications be taken for at least four to nine months after depressive symptoms have improved. People with recurrent depression may need to stay on medication to prevent or lessen further episodes.

People taking antidepressants should be monitored by a professional who knows about treatment clinical depression to ensure the best treatment with the fewest side effects. It is also very important that your doctor be informed about all other medicines that are taken, including vitamins and herbal supplements, to avoid any dangerous interactions. Alcohol and some medications – including over-the-counter medications – can interact negatively with antidepressant medication **Don't discontinue medications without talking with your doctor. Some medications can cause side effects if stopped abruptly.**

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Psychotherapy with a qualified mental health professional can help relieve depression. Therapy can be effective in treating clinical depression, especially depression that is less severe. Studies have shown that short-term (10-20 weeks) courses of therapy are often helpful in treating depression. Cognitive-behavioral therapy helps change negative styles of thinking and behaving that may contribute to clinical depression. Interpersonal therapy focuses on dealing more effectively with other people and working to change relationships that can cause or worsen clinical depression.

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is a procedure that is sometimes considered when medications and other treatments have failed. ECT stimulates the brain with a brief, controlled series of electrical impulses. ECT is a controversial treatment. Although it may have beneficial results, it also may involve significant risks. A thorough discussion of all the benefits and risks of ECT should take place before this treatment is initiated.

Make the most of your treatment

Treatment as a partnership: Discussing treatment options and voicing concerns with doctors or therapists is essential for effective healing. Asking questions and getting answers is part of informed and appropriate treatment.

If necessary, change treatment or get a second opinion: If there is no improvement after six to eight weeks of treatment – or if symptoms worsen - another treatment approach, another medication, or getting a second opinion from another health care professional may be appropriate.

Support groups: In addition to treatment, participation in a support group can also be very helpful during the recovery process. Support group members share their experiences with the illness, learn coping skills and exchange information on community providers. Many people also find strength and support through their religious and spiritual affiliations.

Stay healthy: It is also important for someone with depression to get plenty of rest and moderate exercise, and to eat nutritious, well-balanced meals during treatment.

For more information, contact Mental Health America at 414-276-3122 or visit our web site at www.mhawisconsin.org.

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