

1. Is there a clinical definition for depression, or a by-the-book way to diagnose depression?

Clinical depression is a mental state that is characterized by feelings of sadness, hopelessness, low self-esteem and often a pronounced sense of despair and loneliness. There is also a loss of interest or pleasure in nearly all activities. It is important to note that in children and adolescents, the mood may appear as being irritable rather than sad.

In diagnosing depression, a mental health professional will look for symptoms which include; but not limited to the following:

- difficulty concentrating, remembering details and making decisions
- fatigue or decreased energy
- feelings of guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness
- insomnia or excess sleeping
- pronounced increase or decrease in appetite
- loss of interest in hobbies once pleasurable, including sex
- persistent sad, anxious or 'empty' feelings
- thoughts of suicide
- irritability or restlessness

2. Is clinical depression usually a result of a life experience, or can it happen without a definable cause?

The answer is both. Depression is often triggered by a traumatic event or crisis in a person's life. Often a client identifies the beginning of their depression as having followed a job loss, an ending of a significant relationship or death of a loved one or family member. Other times, depression seems to strike without any reason or identifiable cause. One client described the experience as "feeling the dark clouds beginning to gather overhead." Although there is no single cause of depression, several things contribute to clinical depression.

- 1) Family history or genetic predisposition. Genetics play an important part in depression. It can run in families for generations.
- 2) Trauma or stress. Things like financial problems, the breakup of a relationship, death of a loved one or significant life changing event can all contribute to the onset of a depressive episode.
- 3) Physical condition or changes in health. Serious medical conditions like heart disease, cancer, HIV, can all contribute to depression for both psychological and biological reasons.
- 4) Other psychological disorders. Anxiety disorders, eating disorders, OCD, and especially substance abuse often appear with depression.

Whatever the cause, depression is not just a state of mind. It is related to physical changes in the brain, and connected to an imbalance of chemicals that regulate mood.

3. What are the most effective ways to treat depression?

The most effective treatment for depression includes a combination of psychotherapy, along with properly prescribed medication. Medication is not always necessary but may be an option that your mental health professional will want to discuss with you.

Psychotherapy or 'talk therapy' is an effective treatment for clinical depression. Its benefits include; helping you to reduce stress in your life, learning coping skills, learning new perspectives on problems with family, friends or co-workers, and understanding feelings and behaviors that just don't make sense. On its own, psychotherapy may not be enough to resolve severe depression. If this is the case, your therapist may refer you to a doctor for a medical evaluation to see if an antidepressant is warranted.

4. In battling depression, what kind of things require involvement from family members?

The most important thing is to be supportive, recognize the signs and symptoms of depression, and to seek professional help when necessary. It is important to understand that people who suffer from depression often have suicidal thoughts and ideas, In order to keep them safe it is essential to recognize the signs of depression and take them seriously. Below is a list of warning signs family members should be familiar with:

- .Excessive sadness or moodiness
- .Sudden calmness
- .Withdrawal or isolating
- .Changes in personality and appearance
- .Dangerous or self-harmful behavior
- .Recent trauma or life crisis
- .Making preparation
- .Threatening behavior

Remember, it is important to recognize the warning signs for suicide and intervene before the person can complete the process of self destruction.

5. And do people living with a person suffering from depression need their own support?

I am a strong advocate for 'care for the caregiver!' Caring for someone who suffers from depression is a difficult and frustrating task. Depression is difficult to understand and its symptoms often threaten relationships, jobs, and the joy one receives from everyday activities. The best advice I can give to caregivers, is to try to understand the disease as best as possible, seek help and attend to their own physical and emotional needs as they are caring for their loved one.

