

What is clinical depression?

Depression is a medical illness, just like cancer or diabetes. It is not the “blues”. The blues are normal feelings that eventually pass. The feelings associated with depression last longer than a couple of weeks. If your friend has depression, he can't talk himself out of it. Your friend isn't weak and doesn't have a character flaw. Having depression isn't his fault. Depression affects the whole body – thoughts, feelings, behavior, physical health, appearance, and all areas of a person's life – home, work, school and social life. Depression can be treated successfully just like other illnesses.

What causes depression?

Depression is triggered by a complex combination of genetic, psychological and environmental factors. Genetic means that in some families, depression is inherited, passed down through genes. Psychological makeup has to do with personality traits and environmental factors means life circumstances. The brain is an organ of the body just like the heart, liver and kidneys. If the chemicals in the brain (neurotransmitters) that regulate how a person thinks, feels and acts, get out of balance, the brain can get “sick” and the result can be clinical depression. A bad or stressful life event could trigger depression, however, a person can also be born with depression. It can also appear out of nowhere, when everything is going fine, at a time when there is no reason to get depression. Depression is nothing to be ashamed of!

Who can get depression?

Anyone. People of all ages can get depression – even children. Boys and girls and men and women can get depression. It doesn't matter what race, ethnicity or economic group a person comes from. Depression affects more than 19 million people living in the United States each year.

Why is it important for friends to recognize the signs and symptoms of depression?

Your friend may not know she has a treatable illness.

Depression affects thinking – she may not be able to think clearly or rationally, or may believe that she can't be helped. When depression is severe, it can cause thoughts of hopelessness and helplessness. The #1 cause of suicide is untreated depression. Early recognition and treatment of depression can save lives.

Many people can help you help a friend who is depressed or suicidal. But sometimes adults don't understand depression and suicide. You can teach them. Ask for help until you find it.

Know The Symptoms Of Depression

In 90% or more of cases, a combination of antidepressant medication and therapy works to treat depression. People with depression can be helped. A physical exam from a doctor is important to rule out any other illnesses that may have the same symptoms as depression.

Your friend might have only a few of the symptoms of depression listed below or he might have many symptoms. Everyone is different. There is no set number of boxes that, once checked, signal depression for sure. If any of the following are particularly bothersome or interfere with life, a person should get help. Can you imagine your friend saying these things?

- I feel sad.
- I feel like crying a lot.
- I'm bored.
- I feel alone.
- I don't really feel sad, just “empty”.
- I don't have confidence in myself.
- I don't like myself.
- I often feel scared, but I don't know why.
- I feel mad, like I could just explode!
- I feel guilty
- I can't concentrate.

- I have a hard time remembering things.
- I don't want to make decisions - its too much work.
- I feel like I'm in a fog.
- I'm so tired, no matter how much I sleep.
- I'm frustrated with everything and everybody.
- I don't have fun anymore.
- I feel helpless.
- I'm always getting into trouble.
- I'm restless and jittery. I can't sit still
- I feel nervous.
- I feel disorganized, like my head is spinning.
- I feel self-conscious.
- I can't think straight. My brain doesn't seem to work.
- I feel ugly.
- I don't feel like talking anymore – I just don't have anything to say.
- I feel my life has no direction.
- I feel life isn't worth living.
- I consume alcohol/take drugs regularly.
- My whole body feels slowed down – my speech, my walk, and my movements.
- I don't want to go out with friends anymore.
- I don't feel like taking care of my appearance.
- Occasionally, my heart pounds, I can't catch my breath, and I feel tingly. My vision feels strange and I feel I might pass out. The feeling passes in seconds, but I'm afraid it will happen again.
- Sometimes I feel like I'm losing it.
- I feel “different” from everyone else.
- I smile, but inside I'm miserable.
- I have difficulty falling asleep or I awaken between 1 A.M. and 5 A.M. and then I can't get back to sleep.
- My appetite has diminished - food tastes so bland.
- My appetite has increased - I feel I could eat all the time.
- My weight has increased/decreased.
- I have headaches.
- I have stomachaches.

- My arms and legs hurt.
- I feel nauseous.
- I'm dizzy.
- Sometimes my vision seems blurred or slow
- I'm clumsy.
- My neck hurts.

Know The Danger Signs Of Suicide

Your friend may have symptoms of depression, but not be suicidal. It is always important to watch for danger signs of suicide though, just in case your friend might be having suicidal thoughts. Have you noticed any of these warning signs of suicide in your friend?

- Talking, reading, or writing about suicide or death.
- Talking about feeling worthless or helpless.
- Saying things like, "I'm going to kill myself," "I wish I were dead," or "I shouldn't have been born."
- Visiting or calling people to say goodbye.
- Giving things away or returning borrowed items.
- Organizing or cleaning bedroom "for the last time."
- Self-destructive behavior like self-cutting, or other "risk-taking" behaviors.
- Obsessed with death, violence and guns or knives.
- Previous suicidal thoughts or suicide attempts.

If you see any of these danger signs in your friend, get help immediately.

Know What to Do

There is a direct link between depression and suicide. Every year in the United States, more than 2,000 teenagers die by suicide.

Take Suicide Seriously

- The statement, "People who talk about suicide, won't really do it," is false!

- If your friend makes comments like, "I wish I were dead," or "It doesn't matter, I won't be around much longer," or "Everyone would be better off without me," it may signal that he is thinking about suicide.

Never Keep Suicide a Secret

- It's okay to ask your friend, "Have you ever felt so badly that you've thought of suicide?" Asking the question won't plant the idea in a person's mind.
- If you suspect a friend has been thinking of suicide, tell a responsible adult, someone who will listen, take you seriously, and take action to get your friend help.
- If the first adult you go to doesn't feel there is cause for concern, keep going until you find someone who takes you seriously. This is an act of true friendship. A suicidal threat, even if said jokingly, should always be taken seriously.

Offer to Help

- Listen carefully, don't judge, and focus on the behaviors that concern you.
- Reassure your friend that there is help and that suicidal thoughts are only temporary
- Offer to go with your friend to his or her parents, counselor or doctor.
- You can say things like, "I can tell you're really hurting," or "I care about you and will do my best to help." Tell him or her, "It's okay, it isn't your fault." A supportive friend can mean so much to someone who is in pain.

Find Someone Who Can Help

- Parent(s), guardian, or other family member
- School psychologist, social worker, counselor or nurse
- Teacher
- Personal physician or nurse
- Personal clergy
- Your local hospital

Friends and Depression

A Guide for Young People *Educate Yourself*



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