

Understanding Sadness and Depression

The Facts

- Approximately 21 million Americans experience depression. (National Institute of Mental Health)
- Major depression is the leading cause of disability for Americans between the ages of 14 and 44 years according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
- Depression most often occurs in women with initial symptoms manifesting in their twenties or earlier. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), women are 70% more likely to experience depression during their lifetime.
- Depression risk increases for women after pregnancy, during menstruation and during menopause.
- Rates of depression for Americans have risen dramatically in the past 50 years according to a study published in *The American Journal of Psychiatry*.
- In study based on a survey published in the journal *Depression and Anxiety* suggests that being divorced, separated, or widowed is closely linked to depression. The loss of a marriage may lead to depression or conversely depression may lead to the loss of a marriage.
- According to the NIMH, married women are more likely to be depressed than unmarried women and married men are less likely to be depressed than unmarried men. In addition, unhappily married women are three times more likely to be depressed than unhappily married men.
- Winter blues are feelings of sadness or depression that are seasonal. They occur during the fall or winter months and are relieved during the spring and summer months.

Possible Contributing Factors

- Situational factors such as work stress; family conflict, financial stress.
- Depletion or abnormalities in the function of the neurotransmitters dopamine, serotonin, and norepinephrine, chemicals that carry signals between nerves and brain cells. Lower levels of serotonin may be responsible for carbohydrate cravings associated with seasonal depression.

4 Other Possible Causes of Sadness and Depression

- Genetic predisposition due to family history
- Vitamin and mineral deficiencies

- Hormonal deficiency
- Diabetes
- Thyroid imbalance
- Chronic physical illness
- Viral infections such as Epstein-Barr, mumps, herpes simplex
- Fibromyalgia
- Chronic fatigue syndrome
- Alzheimer's disease
- Heart disease
- Drug interactions
- Blood pressure medications, beta blockers

Symptoms of Sadness and Depression

- Lethargy and fatigue
- Feelings of sadness, anxiety, or emptiness
- Lack of interest in normal activities or activities that were previously enjoyed
- Social withdrawal
- Changes in appetite
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness or helplessness
- Difficulty concentrating and focusing
- Lack of motivation
- Difficulty making decisions
- Diminished sex drive
- Physical symptoms that do not ease even with treatment
- Sleep disturbance; insomnia, early morning wakefulness or excessive sleeping
- Restlessness, irritability
- Low self-esteem, worthlessness or excessive guilt
- Craving of sugary or starchy foods
- Overeating or appetite loss
- Thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts

Symptoms of Seasonal Sadness

- Blues that occur regularly during the fall or winter months and are relieved in the spring and summer months
- In some individuals, symptoms may occur when the weather is overcast regardless of the time of year

- Craving of sugary or starchy foods

Help for Sadness or Depression

- Spending time outdoors during the day or in places with windows and exposure to daylight
- Exercise, preferably outdoors. One study found an hour's walk in winter sunlight to be as effective as 2 ½ hours under bright artificial light. Exercise raises the level of beta endorphins, body chemicals which may be involved in reducing pain or experiencing pleasure.
- Counseling addressing issues such as stress or emotional triggers. A mental health professional can provide assistance in developing treatment strategies.
- Certain antidepressants may be helpful in more severe cases. They work to restore functioning of serotonin and other neurotransmitters, relieving depression.
- Development of a healthy support system. Strengthening important relationships and staying connected prevents isolation and opportunities for reality testing.

Reading Resources:

- *Winter Blues: Seasonal Affective Disorder-What It Is and How to Overcome It* by Norman Rosenthal, M.D.
- *Getting Your Life Back: The Complete Guide to Recovery from Depression* by Jesse Wright, M.D. and Monica Ramirez Basco, Ph.D.
- *The Freedom from Depression Workbook* by Les Carter, Ph.D. and Frank Minirth, M.D.
- *Finding Joy: 101 Ways to Free Your Spirit and Dance with Life* by Charlotte Davis Kasl, Ph.D.