

What is Depression?

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Mood disorders, including depression, dysthymia and bi-polar disorder are the most common form of mental illness. The prevailing theory about the root cause of depression involves chemical imbalances in the dopamine, serotonin, and other neurotransmitters in the brain. Many things temporarily change the chemistry in the brain: laughing at a good joke, falling in love, praying all appear to have uplifting, “antidepressant” effects.

Depression, and the reinforcing thoughts that accompany it, appear to be a “learned response” much like riding a bicycle or driving a car. So it follows that if depression is a learned response it can also be unlearned with new skills and practice of those skills.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, nearly 21 million American adults experience depression in any given year. While this statistic is a bit—well--depressing, the good news is that if you or someone you love is suffering from depression, you are not alone and there are many avenues of help and support available.

“It’s no use. I’ve tried everything and it just hasn’t helped.”

Feel like you’ve tried everything and it just hasn’t helped? Imagine yourself as a small child learning how to use a fork. The first, second, and even hundredth time you tried to spear your food and bring it to your mouth were a challenge. The food fell off the fork, was pushed off the plate, dropped in your lap, bounced off your nose. But occasionally, almost miraculously, the food landed exactly where you wanted it: in your mouth. You got the wonderful experience of feeding yourself, even though it was difficult and took a lot of work and a lot of mistakes to learn.

Recovery from depression is like that: you cannot give up and you have to try many new and different approaches, often more than once and with other variables adjusted as well, to find just the right one that works for you, and for your depression.

“What about drugs?”

Because depression can be life threatening, using simultaneous treatment approaches (meaning: making more than one change at a time) is best. Therapy, medication, and lifestyle changes are all important. Some people respond to medication and don’t feel they need therapy. That’s okay, but symptom relief is not the same thing as resolution of the problem.

Within the framework of a multi-prong approach, medication is a valuable tool which can be used as a stepping stone to alleviate some of the deepest feelings of depression so therapy can be more effective. As a therapist, I do not believe that drugs alone are the answer because most of the clients who I see do not want to take them for the rest of their lives. However, for some people taking medication is as important and long term as it is for a diabetic to take insulin. But for many, medication is a temporary bridge that helps them across the abyss.

How I work:

In addition to recommending a complete physical to rule out certain medical conditions that can cause depressive symptoms, I work with my clients to understand their history and how that history is influencing them today, and then together we create an individualized approach to resolving depression.

Mental health is, among other things, about living a life in which you have the freedom to choose: free from addictions, compulsions, and owning a personal sense of control. Living a life in which you feel good about who you are and how you are living.

“What can I do to make it better?”

If you think you may be experiencing depression at this time, here are a few ideas to get you started on the road to recovery:

Start seeing a therapist and make a plan together!

1. Make an appointment with a qualified therapist so that you will get the support you need. Friends and family members can be wonderful sources of support, but a professional who is experienced in your illness is important. Just the process of making the appointment will give you a sense of progress and hope. My number is: 206 375-7690
2. Beware of alcohol and other recreational drugs. Alcohol is a depressant and thus will worsen symptoms of depression. Drugs can interfere with the effectiveness of antidepressants and contribute to anxiety, in addition to placing one at risk of health and legal problems. If you are currently using alcohol or drugs don't let that stop you from seeking professional support from a therapist.
3. Avoid alarming stories: don't watch the local news or read the local paper, where the tag line “if it bleeds, it leads” is too often the case. Don't read depressing novels or watch television or movies that involve tragedies. Ask your friends, reference librarian, or favorite search engine for uplifting story recommendations.
4. The energy of gratitude is expansive, and light: the opposite of the energy of depression which is heavy and dark. If you can consciously increase your gratitude you will automatically decrease your depression. In the morning before you get out of bed and in the evening before you turn out the light, mentally list ten things you are grateful for. They can be as small as “I have nice smelling soap in the bathroom,” or as large as having a friend or family member who loves you.
5. For everyone, depressed or healthy, getting regular daily exercise is important. If going to the gym is not your thing, consider yoga, swimming, turning your stereo up and dancing around, or going for long walks or jogs in your local park. There is an exercise called NIA available in most metropolitan areas which specifically aims to increase one's sense of joy through movement.
In fact, a recent study showed exercise to be equally effective in relieving symptoms of depression as Zoloft, a commonly prescribed anti-depressant. If you are more than ten pounds overweight or have any complicating medical conditions, consult your doctor before starting an exercise program.
6. Recovery from depression involves different things for different people. For some, getting involved in a spiritual support system is a vital part of recovery.

Most importantly, remember this: depression is temporary, and help is available.