



Dealing with Depression

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Mary came to the office for therapy. She said she was “feeling down” and this was happening “too much of the time.” Also, things didn’t seem as enjoyable to her as they used to.

Her story went something like this... She was 33 years old. She had been married for nine years and had two kids.

For most of her married life, she felt happy. But lately, things had been different. She had been having a hard time listening to what her kids had to say when they came home from school. And her favorite TV show, “Friends,” which usually brought lots of laughs, had not seemed as funny anymore.

She had begun feeling irritable more often and she found herself getting upset with her husband about things that didn’t usually bother her. She felt tired more than usual and now she would often start projects that she didn’t finish.

She began to catch herself daydreaming about losing her mother to cancer a year ago or thinking about how unfulfilling her life had become.

When Mary discussed these problems with her family doctor, he told her they were signs of depression. Then, when he recommended counseling, she decided to try it. Her counselor confirmed the diagnosis and started treating her.

A Common Problem

Mary, like 14 million other Americans, suffers from depression. Since October is National Depression and Mental Health Month, this is a good time to boost awareness of depression and what people can do to overcome it.

Mary’s symptoms may seem obvious to an outsider. But when individuals become depressed, they often have a hard time judging it for themselves. What can they look for? The most common sign of depression in adults is sadness. Other common symptoms include:

- Loss of interest or loss of pleasure in things
- Lack of energy
- Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness
- Irritability or short temper
- Crying
- Feeling numb or empty
- Social withdrawal
- Disruption of your common sleep pattern
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Feelings of guilt

Therapists have learned to recognize the different levels of depression. They can judge the severity of depression based on its intensity, its duration, and its causes. Starting with this understanding, they can then determine the best course of treatment.

Getting Help

Now here's the good news. Depression has become very treatable. The types of therapies for treating it have improved, as have the types of medication.

Scientific studies show that the fastest therapeutic response is through medication. But, with medication alone, there's a high likelihood the symptoms will recur when you stop taking the medication. Through counseling, the therapeutic response is gradual. It takes longer to show a change in symptoms but the symptoms are less likely to recur.

So therapists typically recommend both counseling and medication.

This makes sense from another perspective too. There's good evidence that depression has both a biological and a psychological component. The biological component refers, in large part, to the balance of certain chemicals in our brain. This can be changed with the antidepressant medications (such as Prozac, Paxil, Wellbutrin, and Lexapro).

Then there's the psychological component. This refers to the thoughts or images in our minds that lead to sadness. It is possible that by changing our thoughts, we can change our brain chemistry. That may be why counseling alone has an effect. For less severe depression, this may be all that's needed. But for long-term or severe depression, counseling plus medication is almost always the recommended course of treatment.

How's Mary doing today? Very well. With medication and ongoing therapy, she has found that all of her symptoms have decreased. She still has a few things she's "working on" in therapy but now she comes for sessions once every three weeks instead of once a week.

She feels happier now and looks forward to continued improvement.

Rich Bayer, Ph.D., is the CEO of Upper Bay Counseling and Support Services, Inc. and a practicing psychologist.

For more information contact Upper Bay Counseling and Support Services, Inc., 200 Booth Street, Elkton, MD 21921, 410-996-3400. All rights reserved.

Copyright 2003