



What to Do When Facing Depression

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

For people with depression, the world appears dim. Everything turns gloomy. And the sadness feels overwhelming.

Depression is by far the most common mental health disorder. Every year, approximately seven percent of us will fall prey to its symptoms.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, the symptoms include:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" feeling
- Feelings of hopelessness or pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness
- Irritability, restlessness
- Loss of interest in activities or hobbies that were once pleasurable, including sex
- Fatigue and decreased energy
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering details, or making decisions
- Insomnia, early-morning wakefulness, or excessive sleeping
- Overeating, or appetite loss
- Thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts
- Aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems that do not ease even with treatment.

Note that, among the symptoms, “persistent sadness” is the first criterion. This may require some additional explanation.

We all experience sadness from time to time. It’s a natural response to certain life-changing events, such as experiencing the death of a loved one, going through a break-up or divorce, or experiencing some kind of severe trauma. Sadness may also occur as our response to being diagnosed with a chronic illness. But if this sadness continues for more than a couple of months, it is considered persistent and may be diagnosed as depression.

Also the symptoms of depression tend to be linked with the abuse of alcohol or drugs. Studies show that more than 30% of people who have substance abuse problems also have depression.

Finding the Best Treatment

For those who are experiencing depression, there is actually some good news. This condition has become very treatable. Over the past 20 years, the types of therapies for treating depression have improved and the antidepressant medications have become more effective.

Admittedly the treatments take some time. The fastest therapeutic response is through medication, which takes up to four to six weeks before you experience the full effect. Psychotherapy typically takes longer than that.

The newer antidepressant medications are more precise in their action on brain chemistry and have fewer side effects than older antidepressants. These include Prozac, Lexapro, Zoloft, Paxil, Celexa, Effexor, Cymbalta, and Wellbutrin.

With psychotherapy, also known as “talk therapy,” the process is gradual. It may take a few months before you experience a reversal of symptoms but you should begin noting some improvement after the first few weeks. The types of therapy that have a proven track record with depression are cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and interpersonal therapy (IBT). CBT helps individuals to restructure their negative thought patterns and learn how to replace these with a more realistic and positive outlook. CBT can also help you recognize and change behaviors that may be making your depression worse. IBT helps you understand how your relationships may be the source of some of your depression and gives you ways to work through or otherwise change these relationships.

Scientific research now reveals that the best treatment for moderate to severe depression is a combination of psychotherapy and medication. While medication has the fastest effect, the risk of recurrence of the depression is high. Psychotherapy has a low relapse rate, but takes longer to work. A combination of the two treatments hastens the beneficial impact and reduces relapses.

For mild to moderate depression, psychotherapy may be the only intervention you need but, for more severe depression, a combination of both psychotherapy and medication is recommended. This guideline has been shown to produce the best results when treating the various levels of depression.

If you were to self-manage your depression, there are a number of techniques that can be helpful. These include exercise, light therapy, self-help books, stress management methods such as meditation or prayer, and diet.

Exercise has been shown to alleviate symptoms of depression. When done on a routine basis, the results are so significant that this intervention tops the list of self-help techniques.

Light therapy can help too, particularly with “seasonal depression.” We are all sensitive to the effect of light on our moods. Some people with severe depression have been shown to be even more sensitive. Light therapy (staying in brightly lit rooms and reading under bright light) has been shown to help lift mood in these individuals.

There are a number of self-help books that offer techniques for managing your depression. Some of these, such as Mary Ellen Copeland’s *Depression Workbook*, have been proven to be very successful.

When we experience too much stress in our lives, this can add to our feelings of depression. By reducing stress, we can usually relieve some of our depression as well. There are many stress management tools. Practicing meditation or using prayer are two stress management techniques that are quite effective.

A change in diet too may help reduce depression. A change to the Mediterranean diet, for example, has been shown to relieve symptom of depression. Some specific, helpful hints include: 1) changing from simple carbohydrates to complex carbs (basically from sugars to whole-grain

foods), 2) adding more Omega-3 foods to your diet such as fatty fish, flaxseed or walnuts, and 3) making sure you're getting enough Vitamin D either through your diet or by supplementation.

But it's important to know that, if you try the self-management techniques as your first intervention and they do not go far enough to lift you out of depression, then be sure to start going to a professional for therapy and/or medication.

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