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wellbeing, ability, recovery

# Depression | Overview

A brief overview of the causes, signs and types of depression.

Everyone feels sad sometimes, but if sadness lasts too long it may be depression. Although depression may strike 'out of the blue' and for no obvious reason, there is usually more than one cause.

Some of the common causes may include:

- Death of a loved one – a spouse, close relative or pet
- The onset of chronic illness or pain
- Family history of depression
- Financial worries
- Loneliness
- Anger (depression has been called 'frozen anger' by some therapists. If you were unable to express your feelings at the time – perhaps because you were a child, or your feelings were unacceptable to others – the anger becomes internalised and is expressed as depression)
- Drugs and alcohol - Although people may be tempted to have a drink to cheer up, alcohol is a depressant, and will tend to make you feel worse overall. Some drugs can also make you depressed, especially if used repeatedly.

## Signs of depression

The onset of the first episode of major depression may not be obvious if it is gradual or mild. The symptoms of major depression characteristically represent a significant change from how a person functioned before the illness. Feeling low or sad is not the only sign of depression.

Common symptoms will usually include a combination of the following:

- persistently sad or irritable mood
- pronounced changes in sleep, appetite, and energy
- tiredness and fatigue even when doing very little
- difficulty thinking, concentrating, decision-making and remembering
- being more worried or anxious than normal
- being snappy or irritable
- avoiding other people
- physical slowing or agitation
- lack of interest in or pleasure from activities that were once enjoyed
- feelings of guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness, and emptiness
- recurrent thoughts of death or suicide
- excessive crying
- persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain



When several of these symptoms of depressive illness occur at the same time, last longer than two weeks, and interfere with ordinary functioning, professional treatment is needed.

The symptoms of depression may vary from person to person, and also depend on the severity of the depression. Depression causes changes in thinking, feeling, behaviour, and physical well-being. People who are depressed often have anxiety as well – the two problems often occur together, and each can make the other worse. If you are feeling anxious, your mind may be full of busy, repetitive thoughts, which make it hard to concentrate, relax, or sleep. You may have physical symptoms, such as headaches, aching muscles, sweating and dizziness. Anxiety may cause physical exhaustion and general ill health.

Depressive disorders come in different forms. There are several different diagnoses for depression, mostly determined by the intensity of the symptoms, the duration of the symptoms, and the specific cause of the symptoms, if that is known.

**Major Depression** – This is the most serious type of depression, in terms of number of symptoms and severity of symptoms, but there are significant individual differences in the symptoms and severity.

**Dysthymic Disorder** – This refers to a low to moderate level of depression that persists for at least two years, and often longer. While the symptoms are not as severe as a major depression, they are more enduring and resistant to treatment.

**Unspecified Depression** – This category is used to help researchers who are studying other specific types of depression, and do not want their data confounded with marginal diagnoses. It includes people with a serious depression, but not quite severe enough to have a diagnosis of a major depression.

**Adjustment Disorder, with Depression** – This category describes depression that occurs in response to a major life stress or crisis.

**Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)** – this is seasonal depression which is related to day length. It usually comes on in the autumn and winter, when days are short and the sun is low in the sky, and gets better as the days get longer and brighter.

**Postnatal depression** – many mothers have ‘the baby blues’ soon after the birth of their baby, but it usually passes after a day or two. Postnatal depression is a much more serious problem and can occur any time between two weeks and two years after the birth.

**Bipolar Depression (Manic depression)** – This type includes both high and low mood swings, as well as a variety of other significant symptoms not present in other depressions.





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