

Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Delving Into and Out of Depression

"I feel depressed" We've probably all uttered these words at one time or another in our lives. Most often we are referring to feeling sad or unhappy in reaction to something negative or bad that is going on in our life. Short episodes of feeling depressed in reaction to life situations is a normal and natural part of our emotional life. However, should feelings of sadness persist day in and day out without lifting, a person may be experiencing depression, and that may require professional intervention and treatment.

Understanding Depression

A Common Condition

It is important to know that depression is very common. Many people who experience depression feel that they are alone in their experience but this is not the case. Ten to fifteen percent of people will experience depression in their lifetime and depression has been found to run in families. As well, depression can affect a person at any age or stage of life.

A Biological Basis

The exact cause of depression is unknown, however, research suggests that neurotransmitters or brain chemicals are involved. The brain regulates our emotions through two main neurotransmitters called norepinephrine and serotonin.

When these chemicals are at appropriate levels, we will feel a normal range of emotions - glad, sad, mad - in response to things or events in our environment. When the chemicals are out of balance, we can be left feeling unhappy all of the time, even in response to things that would ordinarily make us feel very happy.

Triggers for Depression

There are a number of things that may trigger an episode of depression including traumatic or stressful situations; a physical illness; side effects of some medications; hormone irregularities, and drug and alcohol misuse.

Signs That May Signal Depression

Recognizing the signs of depression is an important first step towards seeking professional help and feeling better. A person who is depressed may experience any number of the following symptoms:

- feeling sad most of the time
- a loss of interest in once enjoyable hobbies, activities and people
- trouble falling asleep or sleeping too much
- increase or decrease in appetite or weight
- feeling tired and weak
- feeling anxious or restless
- problems concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- crying more easily than usual
- feeling overwhelmed by negative thoughts

- loss of interest in sex
- feeling worthless, guilty, helpless or hopeless
- thinking or talking about death or suicide

Should you be experiencing any of these symptoms we strongly recommended that you seek professional help.

Approaches to Treating Depression

Depending on a person's symptoms and needs, depression can frequently be effectively treated with medication, counselling and most often a combination of the two.

Medication

Because of the imbalance of brain chemicals found in depression, anti-depressant medication that restores the chemical balance often plays a key role in the treatment of depression. A medical doctor or pharmacist would be able to provide you with extensive information on prescribed anti-depressant medications and their use.

Counselling

Meeting with a professional can be very beneficial for a person experiencing depression. This provides an opportunity to openly and confidentially express the sad feelings and negative thoughts a person is experiencing and to identify strategies for coping with these. Discussing and gaining insight into the circumstances that may have triggered the episode of depression can also be helpful.

Other Things That May Help

When spirits are low, it is hard to muster the energy required to take care of ourselves, but it is ever so important to do a few small things each day to move in the direction of recovery:

- Avoid using drugs and alcohol which can worsen the symptoms.
- Do the best possible to eat healthily.
- Get out for short walks.
- Stay connected with friends and family, and go along with some of their urges to participate in once enjoyable activities.
- Work hard at understanding that the depression is not your fault.
- Talk to people who have gone through and recovered from depression.
- Postpone any big life decisions such as a changes in house, job or spouse as judgment may be compromised by the emotionality of depression.
- Take care not to expect the recovery process to occur rapidly as this will be discouraging. Recovery is a slow, 'little by little' process.

When a Friend or Family Member is Depressed

If a friend or a family member is depressed, one of the most helpful things that you can do for them is to encourage and assist them in getting professional help.

Other things to remember

Work hard at being patient with the person. Listen as best you can. Offer encouragement - that they will get through this. Try to avoid obvious solutions such as - 'be strong,' or 'be positive'. Invite the person to participate in activities, but keep these activities short and simple. Share regular day-to-day conversation from time-to-time in an effort to normalize the interactions. To ensure the strength of your own health and well-being, remember to take care of your own needs, and to take regular breaks from supporting your friend or family member.

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