

## **Depression as a Response to Trauma**

Not everyone who has experienced a major loss or been affected by a violent event will be depressed. However, some will and it is important to be able to identify the signs and symptoms of depression in order to get help.

Depression ranges in the severity of its symptoms, and we are not all affected in the same way. Symptoms associated with depression include: fatigue or loss of energy; change in sleep patterns; loss of interest in activities and people we once enjoyed; change in appetite or weight; feelings of hopelessness, guilt, worthlessness, overwhelming grief and sadness, or irritability; crying spells; inability to concentrate; lack of interest in sex; a change in attitude toward money; problems with drugs and/or alcohol; and persistent thoughts of suicide or death.

When you are clinically depressed, you can't just command yourself to feel better or make yourself snap out of it. Depression is a disease, an illness involving your body chemistry. It is no more a sign of weakness than having asthma or diabetes.

### **How common is it?**

Depression is more common than most people think. It is estimated that there are over ten million Americans who suffer from the effects of this mood disorder. At least ten percent of the male population will become depressed in their lifetimes, and approximately twice as many women.

If left untreated, the symptoms of this disease can last from a period of a few months to several years. The depressed person's relationships suffer; the ability to perform productively at work diminishes, and susceptibility to medical problems increases.

### **What causes it?**

Experts believe that both heredity and biochemistry contribute to an individual's vulnerability to clinical depression. The onset of the illness is usually triggered by an external event representing a major loss to the person, for example, death of a family member, divorce or loss of a job. It also can begin with events that may not seem traumatic to others, but are perceived as an important threat or loss to a person who is depressed. For example, a large drop in the price of a recommended stock can be the trigger event for a broker who takes pride in picking only 'winners' for his/her major clients.

In the development of depression, external events may initially trigger normal feelings of sadness or the "blues" for the person affected. However, instead of the feelings diminishing as they most often do, symptoms escalate in their severity and last for an extended period of time. The physical potential for depression may exist through heredity and our individual biochemistry, but the probability of the disease's appearance is related in part to how we've learned to interpret the importance of external events over which we have no control.

### **What can someone with depression do about it?**

Depression can be treated and the sooner the better, since the illness can progress in its severity. If the symptoms described above last for more than two weeks, it's important for the person to talk with a mental health professional. However, if the person has thoughts about suicide, a mental health professional should be consulted immediately. The mental health professional will explore with the individual the causes of the symptoms. A physical check-up also may be necessary to rule out other medical problems.

A combination of medication and psychotherapy has been found to be the most effective treatment for depression. While medication works on the biochemical disturbance, psychotherapy enables individuals

to identify events that are triggers for depression as well as helps them to learn strategies for gaining control over their lives.

Medications vary according to how the illness is treated biochemically, the particular form of depression, and the medication's effectiveness for the particular individual. There are mental health professionals who have expertise in making determinations of the kind and strength of medication that will be most effective.

What is most distressing about depression is that there are individuals suffering from this disease who are not seeking help. Treatment helps more than 80% of those people who seek a way out from depression's darkness.

© 2001 Harris, Rothenberg International