



Mental health and depression

Good days and bad days, joys and disappointments—each is part of a normal life. You don't always have control over the things that make you happy or unhappy, but you can do many things to keep your spirits up. You can also do things that put more joy in your life.

What is depression?

Depression is more than just feeling sad or blue; it causes severe symptoms that affect how you feel, think and handle daily activities. Depression is not a sign of weakness or a character flaw. It's a real illness, and it often requires treatment to get better.¹

Just blue, or are you depressed?

Review the list below, and see if you have any of these signs of depression. Talk to your healthcare provider if you have any of the following symptoms:¹

- Persistent sad, anxious or “empty” mood
- Feelings of hopelessness or negativity
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness or helplessness
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Restlessness or irritability
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Difficulty sleeping or changes in your sleeping habits
- Changes in appetite or unintended weight changes
- Aches or pains, headaches, cramps or digestive problems
- Decreased energy or feelings of fatigue

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What makes people feel sad or depressed?

Scientists believe that people feel sad or depressed when certain chemicals in the brain get out of balance. Many things can trigger an imbalance, including:¹

- Conditions like heart disease, cancer, diabetes or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), or a major surgery, heart attack or stroke
- Common life changes like the death of a loved one, loss of independence, retirement, relocation or general health problems
- Family, work or financial stress

Though the sadness that can come with many of these events or situations is normal, depression is not. You can take steps to improve your mood and overcome these feelings.

Improve your mood

Talk to your healthcare provider if you feel sad, depressed, downhearted or blue. He or she can make sure you do not have a medical condition that is causing these feelings and offer other suggestions to improve your mood. **You can also try some of these ideas:**

- **Exercise your mind and your body.** Staying active is thought to mimic some of the effects of antidepressant medications by releasing feel-good endorphins—these are natural brain chemicals that boost your sense of well-being.²
- **Get out and about.** Getting together with others can give you a lift.³ Make plans to join a group for a movie or gather for a potluck. Accept social invitations even if you don't feel like attending.
- **Get in a good routine.** Follow a daily routine of activities, including set times for meals, snacks, exercise and socializing. Go to bed and wake up at about the same time each day, and try to get about 7–9 hours of sleep each night.
- **Manage stress in a healthy way.** Chronic stress can lead to depression.⁴ Try to find relaxing activities you enjoy, such as yoga, tai chi and meditation. Avoid using drugs and alcohol to handle stress and other unpleasant feelings.
- **Talk it out.** Talking to a trained counselor might help you feel better. You might only need to meet with a counselor once for a few weeks or a couple of months. Ask your doctor or spiritual leader to suggest someone.

Talk to your healthcare provider

Sometimes self-help strategies alone can't lift a person's mood. If you're feeling down and can't seem to shake it, make an appointment with your healthcare provider. Say, for example, "I have been feeling down for more than two weeks. This is not my usual self, and I'm wondering if I could be depressed. Can you check that for me?" Your doctor will know what to do.

Be prepared to discuss your symptoms and personal information that may play a role in your mood, and be open to trying different treatment options until you find what works for you.

If antidepressant medicine is part of your treatment plan, be sure to take all of your medication as directed. Always consult with your doctor before you stop any medication, and discuss any side effects or concerns you have.

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If you feel like you want to hurt yourself or others, seek help immediately. Contact a friend, family member, spiritual leader or doctor. If you need to, call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-TALK (8255)** 24 hours per day, seven days per week. Or go to a local emergency department; trained providers will help you.

Questions to ask my doctor

References

¹National Institute of Mental Health

www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression-what-you-need-to-know/depression-what-you-need-to-know-pdf_151827_151827.pdf

²Mayo Clinic

www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/in-depth/depression-and-exercise/art-20046495

³Mayo Clinic

www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/social-support/art-20044445

⁴National Institute of Mental Health

www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/stress/index.shtml

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