

# Life Skills

## Developing Skills for Life's Challenges

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## HELP IN BATTLING DEPRESSION

### **What Is It?**

Depression is a widespread problem in our society. In fact, it has been called the world's number one public health problem. One out of eight people can be expected to require treatment for depression in his or her life time. In its milder forms, almost everyone suffers from depression at some time in their life. We're probably all familiar with the "gloomy", "down", or "blue" feeling of sadness that may overtake us on occasion. In its more severe forms, it may lead to suicide, the rate of which is steadily increasing.

This disturbance of mood and functioning may be accompanied by other experiences such as loss of interest or pleasure in formerly enjoyable activities, a change in appetite, sleep difficulty, or loss of energy.

Depression, then is a set of symptoms or signs that tend to appear together,

with depressed mood or loss of interest in usually pleasurable activities being the most prominent. In order to meet the criteria for most definitions of depression, the symptoms must present a significant change in mood and functioning, and persist for at least two weeks. Depression may be so severe as to totally disrupt a person's life, cause great anguish, and require hospitalization.

Perhaps you or someone you know is or was recently depressed. Some people seem to be more susceptible to depression than others and have recurring periods where they struggle with it.

Most of us will experience the blue mood from time to time, and can take steps to lessen its intensity and frequency.

### **Finding Help**

Professional assessment is often the best first step in battling depression. Counseling or therapy can help a person to do better in managing life's challenges, and to build skills and promote growth necessary to live a more satisfying life. A combination of counseling and medication therapy is suitable for many depressed individuals. There are more kinds of antidepressants available today, and they are more effective with less side effects than in the past. If you suspect that you or someone you know may suffer from depression, contact a mental health professional or doctor about a screening for depression.

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### **For Help or Information:**

William D. Morgan, Psy.D.  
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- Growth Oriented Psychotherapy
- Assessments and Testing
- Counseling • Consultations
- Executive Coaching
- Organizational Development

Dr. Morgan is a psychologist in private practice in Paoli, PA. His approach to counseling and therapy is distinctively growth-oriented, emphasizing gaining the skills needed to handle life's challenges.

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### **Symptoms of Depression**

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- ✓ Sad mood
- ✓ Diminished interest or pleasure in normally enjoyable activities
- ✓ Change in appetite
- ✓ Sleep Difficulties
- ✓ Decreased energy
- ✓ Irritability
- ✓ Feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt
- ✓ Difficulty thinking or concentrating
- ✓ Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide
- ✓ Withdrawal from friends, family

**Note:** Not all of these symptoms need to be present to be considered depression.

# Causes and Types of Depression

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Depression has no single cause. There are many possible causes. Factors that can cause depression include distressing circumstances, negative or dysfunctional thinking patterns (e.g. very pessimistic), and physical or biologically-based conditions. Depression may range from mild to severe. Any one of these is sufficient to cause depression, but often the cause may be a combination of two or more.

**Situational factors.** Some situations may be depressing in themselves. What kinds of situations lead to depression? Here are a few:

- 1. Stressful.** Prolonged exposure to stressful situations increases the chances of becoming depressed.
- 2. Losses.** Examples: the death of a loved one, loss of a friendship, marriage or opportunity.
- 3. Lack of affirmation** or lack of a supportive relationship. We all need a certain amount of positive feedback and support.

**Thought patterns.** A second factor known to commonly contribute to depression is how a person thinks-how he or she views things. Certain patterns or habits of thought are likely to lead to depression even if the situation is positive. Here are a few kinds of faulty thought patterns that lead to depression:

- 1. Negative thought patterns about oneself.** Examples: "I'm no good." "I failed again!" "I'm stupid/ugly/unlovable."
- 2. Irrational beliefs.** Unrealistic expectations or assumptions of how the world, other people or oneself "should", "ought", or "must" be are at the root of much emotional disturbance. Example: "Everyone should love and approve of me for everything that I do."
- 3. Selective attention and memory.** Sometimes we feel bad because we overlook successes and the positive feedback we receive, and focus on and remember the negative.
- 4. Pessimism.** An overly negative outlook on life, a pattern of negative expectations.

**Physical causes.** Research has determined a biological link to depression that may, in fact, be the main cause of some kinds of depression. Examples:

- 1. Biologically-based depression,** which is most likely to emerge in middle age and often responds well to medication.
- 2. Postpartum depression** and similar disorders. Sudden, acute, and severe depression is common following major shocks such as surgery, trauma, and even giving birth.

**Behavioral factors.** Some aspects of a person's behavioral patterns may contribute to depression. Examples:

- 1. Lack of social skills.** People who are recurrently depressed often lack important relationship skills such as meeting people, starting conversations, or assertiveness. These skills are crucial to forming and sustaining a network of social support.
- 2. Social withdrawal.** Depressed people are prone to withdraw from people and activities, which may exacerbate depression.

# Dealing with Depression

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The good news is that nearly anyone with depression can be helped. For those minor bouts with the blues, changes that can help include: practicing more positive, realistic self-talk, exercise (it creates a natural elevation in mood), seeking out more frequent pleasant and fun activities, spending time with friends and socializing more, striving for a balanced, realistic outlook on life, dealing with stress and problems more effectively.

For the "clinically" depressed, counseling/psychotherapy and antidepressants have been found to be very effective in treating depression.

A major depression should be taken seriously and professional help sought. The same is true for prolonged or recurrent, though less severe depression which may indicate a difficult-to-change pattern in your life. For those occasional bouts of the blues, some or all of the following methods may be helpful. Here are some approaches many have found beneficial:

- 1. Try to bring about a change in the depressing situation.** If stress or relationship difficulties are contributing to the

mood problems, it is wise to address these directly. Also, try to increase the level of positive experiences in your life. Force yourself to be more active in social and pleasurable pastimes.

- 2. Try to change your view of the depressing situation.** Perhaps there is a more realistic way of looking at your circumstances. We all tend at times to awfulize our problems, use self-downing self-talk, and rigidly cling to unrealistic expectations of how things "should", "ought", or "must" be. What are you telling yourself that is causing yourself to be depressed? Is it accurate? Realistic? **Ask yourself:** "Is it really that bad?" "Where on a badness scale from 0-100% (with 100% being the worst possible thing that could ever happen to you) does this happening fall (25-50-75% bad)? Beware of thinking errors such as exaggerating the importance of things, overgeneralizing (seeing one negative as representing the whole picture), and selective attention to the negative.

- 3. Consider the possibility there is a physical cause to your depression.** Because depression can be biologically-

based, you are encouraged to consult a physician for a complete physical. Also, evaluate your diet, amount of sleep, and time for rest and relaxation. Deficiencies here may be a sufficient or contributing cause to your mood problem. If your down feelings seem to be seasonal, or alternate with extremely "up" mood swings, you should consult a mental health professional for an evaluation for Seasonal Affective Disorder or Bipolar Disorder. Some kinds of depression are very treatable with the proper medication.

- 4. Overcome behavior patterns that contribute to your problem.** If you are lacking in skills necessary to develop and sustain relationships effectively, seek to learn and develop better social skills. There are educational resources such as books, tapes and seminars. **Resist the temptation to withdraw** when you are blue. You only dig a deeper hole for yourself.

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