



# PENNSYLVANIA PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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## What Is Depression?

*By Vincent J. Morello, Ph.D.*

Yes, you can be normal, suffer from clinical depression, and not be going crazy. In fact, in any given year more than 17 million people suffer from clinical depression. Unlike feeling "down in the dumps" for a few days or grieving over a loss, clinical depression can last from as little as a few weeks to as long as several months or even years and significantly affect daily living.

While some persons with depression are able to work, with considerable effort, others can barely get out of bed. People with depression may still smile, but no longer enjoy life. They may feel sadness or simply not be able to feel anything at all. Their concentration and memory are often reduced. They may sleep too much or too little or eat too much or too little. Things that formerly were pleasant no longer are. There is nothing to look forward to. Even sex is a chore. Thoughts of suicide and suicidal behavior become a genuine concern. Making matters worse is that many people blame themselves for being depressed.

Children, adolescents, adults, and older persons suffer from depression. Traumatic and stressful events—losing a job or a family member—can trigger a depression. So can biological factors such as change in body chemistry or a physical illness. Depression affects our minds, emotions, moods, social activity, and bodily functioning. Depressed people begin to think the future is hopeless ("things will never get better") and feel helpless to make positive changes in their predicaments. They worry, can be easily angered, and are sometimes irritable. Their moods can be so negative that they do not want to bathe or change their clothes. They are more aware of pain in different parts of their body. They withdraw from others and may feel others do not care about them. They may push away the very people they want to have assisting them.

There is substantial help for depression. Psychologists are expertly trained mental health providers, and they can administer comprehensive assessments to help identify the depth and causes of depression. For some persons the causes are negative and distorted thinking patterns. For others the causes are ineffective coping skills following misfortune. And for others the causes involve dysfunctional family relationships. Psychologists utilize psychotherapy or "talk therapy." They may use hypnosis, family-based therapy or a behavioral intervention. Some persons experience dramatic improvement in a few sessions; other persons require more ongoing treatment. Psychologists

may refer persons for medication as research shows many individuals benefit from the combination of psychotherapy and antidepressant medication. While medication alone can be quicker to relieve symptoms than psychotherapy, the use of psychotherapy alone results in a lower relapse rate, teaches coping mechanisms, and does not have physical side effects.

Depressed people feel others have abandoned them and do not receive the support they feel they deserve. They may be correct. Living with a depressed person can be difficult and put a strain on friendships and family relationships. A depressed individual may feel they do not want or need help and will "snap out of it" after a while. While snapping out is possible, most people require expert help. Family members often participate in treatment in some way and by including loved ones in treatment, the depressed individual not only improves his/her own well being, but also the well being of those s/he loves.

We now know that depression is highly related to numerous physical problems—cardiac conditions, hypertension, headaches, chronic pain, and muscular-skeletal pain among others. While depression is more likely to strike those with a family history or those who previously have had an episode of depression, almost anyone can be a candidate for the onset of depression.

***Talk to someone who can help.*** If you would like the name of a qualified psychologist in your area, please try our Psychologist Locator.