



Depression or Normal Sadness?

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We hear it all the time: “I didn’t get the job and I’m so depressed.” “Our team lost the game and we’re all depressed about it.” “That movie made me feel so depressed.” The term *depression* has become a catch-all to describe feelings of low mood, regardless of how serious or long-lasting they might be. However, [depression](#) is actually a psychological disorder with a specific set of symptoms that significantly interfere with a person’s physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing.

Depression isn’t normal sadness

Life is full of difficult moments, and many of them cause us to feel sad or disappointed. It’s normal to feel sad or disappointed when we don’t get something we want, when others let us down, or when we lose someone we love. In healthy people, these feelings last for a while and then gradually start getting better. In the meantime, we’re still able to function at home, school, or work, and we’re still able to maintain healthy relationships with people close to us.

In contrast, depression lasts for weeks or months, and causes us to have trouble keeping our lives on track. We may have trouble getting out of bed in the morning, managing our responsibilities at work or school, and getting along with others. In extreme cases, thoughts of self-harm or suicide can be hard to manage.

Who gets depressed, and why?

[The National Center for Health Statistics](#) reported that during August 2021–August 2023, 13.1% of U.S. adolescents and adults age 12 and older had depression in a given 2-week period. Among adolescents and adults with depression, 87.9% reported at least some difficulty with work, home, and social activities because of depression symptoms. Children get depressed too; a study by the [Centers for Disease Control](#) indicated that in 2022-2023, about 4% of children 3-17 had been diagnosed with depression. These numbers may be underestimates, because some people never seek treatment or because their symptoms may come out in different ways. For example, some people abuse substances when they are feeling depressed, and may then be diagnosed with substance abuse rather than depression.

Mental health professionals believe that depression can have many possible causes. These include traumatic and stressful events such as losing a job or a family member. Genetic and biological factors also play a role. While depression is more likely to strike those with a family history or those who previously had an episode of depression, it can happen to anyone.

What does it feel like to be depressed?

Depression is not just about feeling sad. While many depressed people do indeed feel sad, others may feel emotionally numb. Most depressed people find that they no longer enjoy doing things that used to be fun. They may sleep too much or too little, or eat too much or too little. They may experience physical aches and pains. Depression can limit a person's desire to care for their basic needs; for example, not wanting to bathe or change their clothes. Concentration and memory are affected. The future feels hopeless and impossible to change. Thoughts of suicide become a genuine concern. Making matters worse, people often blame themselves for being depressed.

People with depression may isolate themselves, believing others do not care about them. They are often critical of themselves and irritable with others. This can put a strain on friendships and family relationships. A person with depression may feel they do not want or need help. However, most people with clinical depression need support from a mental health professional to recover as quickly as possible.

Treatment for Depression

There is substantial help available for those who may experience depression. Most people do best with a combination of medication and psychotherapy. **Medication** can help relieve symptoms, although it may take some time to find the right medication at the right dosage. **Psychotherapy** can help a person identify the factors contributing to their depression, and learn skills such as healthy thinking, problem-solving, and assertiveness that can help them manage challenges more effectively. **Brain stimulation treatments** such as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and the easier-to-tolerate transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) can also be helpful. Newer treatments such as **ketamine** are being actively studied as well.

Talk to someone who can help! To find a licensed psychologist near you, use PPA's Psychologist Locator at <https://www.papsy.org/locator>. For information on other mental health topics, go to <https://www.papsy.org>, then "Resources" and then "Public Resources". PPA offers these articles for informational purposes only; they are not a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment.