

Mental Health Matters

Plain Talk about Depression and Depressive Disorders



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Most people feel down from time to time, it's a natural reaction to stress and tension. But when those feelings are severe and persistent, a person may be suffering from the illness called depression.

Millions of people are afflicted by depression each year, and yet this illness is widely misunderstood. Too often in the past, depression was mistakenly considered a sign of emotional weakness. Depression is not a weakness or a personality flaw. It is an illness with biological causes. Research has shown that the symptoms of depression are related to an imbalance of important natural substances called neurotransmitters, which act as "messengers" between nerve cells in the brain. Also, life strains can trigger or worsen the symptoms of depression.

The key symptoms of depression are a sad, anxious or empty mood that lasts for two or more weeks; and/or a loss of interest or pleasure in most activities that were once enjoyed. Along with these symptoms, several others may exist. They include feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, guilt, difficulty concentrating, changes in sleep habits, significant changes in weight or appetite, fatigue, irritability, frequent thoughts of death or suicide or suicide attempts. Often times, these symptoms are ignored or untreated. People either do not recognize the symptoms, are afraid to appear "weak," or are too depressed to take action.

Depression can strike in several forms. When a psychiatrist makes a diagnosis of a patient's depressive illness, he or she may use one or more labels to describe it, such as major depression,

dysthymia, manic depression, or seasonal affective disorder.

Major depression is characterized by symptoms that begin suddenly and are so severe that they may interfere with normal functioning. Dysthymia is characterized by a chronic state of mild depression, that is, the person may feel "down" much of the time. Manic depression, also called Bipolar disorder, is diagnosed when a person alternates between periods of depression and periods of mania, that is, a frantic high. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a depression that may result from changes in the seasons. Most cases begin in fall and in winter. Professional treatment is necessary for all these types of depression.

A variety of medications (called antidepressants) can help relieve the symptoms of depression by restoring brain neurochemistry to its original, natural state. A new class of antidepressants called selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRI) relieves the symptoms of depression by increasing the amount of the neurotransmitter, serotonin, available to nerve cells in the brain.

If left untreated, depression can disrupt work, family relations, and limit one's ability to enjoy life. The good news is that medications, such as SSRIs, have been proven safe and effective for the treatment of this illness.

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