

DEPRESSION AND DISABILITY: WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Depression is *not* just feeling sad, blue or discouraged; and it is much more than the normal downs that can be a part of everyday living. It is an illness that affects the whole person—their thoughts, feelings, behavior and physical health.

When people are depressed, they have symptoms nearly all day, everyday, that last at least two weeks. It is when many of these symptoms occur together, cause difficulties in day-to-day functioning, and last longer than a few weeks that they may be signs of a depressive illness.

Depression affects more than 17 million Americans each year. Many are people with disabilities. Not everyone with a disability becomes depressed, and those who do become depressed may not be depressed because of their disability. However, people with disabilities face unique challenges and stresses which place them at increased risk for depression.

Studies have shown that symptoms of depression may be 2 to 10 times more common in individuals with disabilities or chronic illnesses, and depression is one of the most common secondary conditions associated with disability and chronic illness. But the good news is that effective treatments for depression are available.

Symptoms of depression

- Feelings of sadness, anxiety, hopelessness, or emptiness
- Loss of interest in activities that used to be enjoyable
- Sleep problems, such as sleeping too much, having trouble falling or staying asleep, or waking very early in the morning
- Changes in appetite with weight loss or weight gain
- Feelings of restlessness, increased irritability, or frustration
- Decreased energy or becoming tired after normal activities
- Difficulties with memory, concentration, decision making, or mental slowing
- Feelings of excessive guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness
- Decreased interest in interacting with others
- Crying more often than usual
- Recurring thoughts of death or dying
- Thoughts of suicide or suicide attempts

Treating depression

There are many effective treatments available. With appropriate treatment, the majority of people with depression can improve significantly, often within a matter of weeks. Counseling or talk therapy, medications, or a combination of the two are the most common and effective treatments.

If you think that you or someone you care about may be depressed, get help. Have yourself evaluated for depression so that you can get treatment if you need it. People and places you can contact for help include your family doctor and your local hospital, mental health center, or public health clinic.

WHEN BLUE IS YOUR PRIMARY COLOR

Everyone has days when they'd rather stay at home than face the world. While finding strategies that work best for you may be trial and error, there are tried and true actions you can do to help feel less alone, discouraged or blue.

The following are things that will not only help you feel better on a bad day, but also will help reduce your risk for developing a serious depression.

❖ **Talk to friends or family about what you are feeling.**

Feeling sad or disappointed is nothing to be ashamed of, and sometimes just letting people know that you are feeling down can help you begin to feel better. If you can't get out of the house to see friends and family, write a letter or talk with them on the telephone.

❖ **Get in touch with other people with disabilities.**

As much as they may try, non-disabled people can't always understand what it's like to live with a disability. If you are feeling alone or misunderstood, talking with someone who has a similar disability can make all the difference in the world. Your health care provider may be able to give you information about local support groups or provide the names of other individuals who have had similar experiences. Many public libraries have computers that can be used to search the Internet for groups and agencies that provide education and support for individuals with disabilities.


❖ **Become an advocate for yourself and others.**

If you think that environmental and social barriers are contributing to your feeling discouraged, down, angry, or bad about yourself, find out what you can do to make a difference. Become involved in local advocacy groups. Talk to store

managers who make aisles too narrow for wheelchairs. Write your congressman about the problems with health care and insurance often faced by people with disabling conditions.

❖ **Volunteer.** Volunteering can be a meaningful and rewarding way to spend your time. It can get you out of the house and provide opportunities for interacting with others. If you can't get out of the house, make phone calls, write letters, or do other kinds of volunteer activities from your home. Spending time and energy helping others can help take your mind off your own troubles and make you feel appreciated by others.

❖ **Exercise.** Physical activity can be one of the most effective ways to combat depression. Even if you have significant physical limitations, increasing your level of physical activity, even just a little bit, will help improve your mood.

❖ **Manage Stress.** Although stress doesn't always cause depression, stress tends to make depression symptoms worse. Finding stress management techniques that work for you—relaxing, meditating, praying, watching funny movies, doing crafts, keeping a journal, or any other activities that make you feel less stressed—can make you less vulnerable to depression. 

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

Depression and Disability: A Practical Guide

by Dr. Karla Thompson.
NC Office on Disability & Health
UNC-CH, CB# 8185
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-8185
For a free copy, call 919-966-2932.
Copies may be downloaded from
the NCODH web site in PDF or
HTML formats:
<www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncodh>

National Depressive and Manic Depressive Association

730 N. Franklin St., Suite 501
Chicago, IL 60610
800-826-3632
<www.ndmda.org>

National Foundation for Depressive Illness, Inc.

P.O. Box 2257
New York, NY 10116-2257
800-248-4344
<www.depression.org/>

National Mental Health Association Center

1021 Prince St.
Alexandria, VA 22314-2971
800-969-6642
<www.nmha.org/>

By Karla Thompson, Ph.D, Departments of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation and of Psychiatry at UNC-Chapel Hill's School of Medicine



"Horseback riding. The horse is an amazing freedom. I can go in the forest, water, meadow—where my chair won't go. The stresses of the day disappear when I go to the barn."

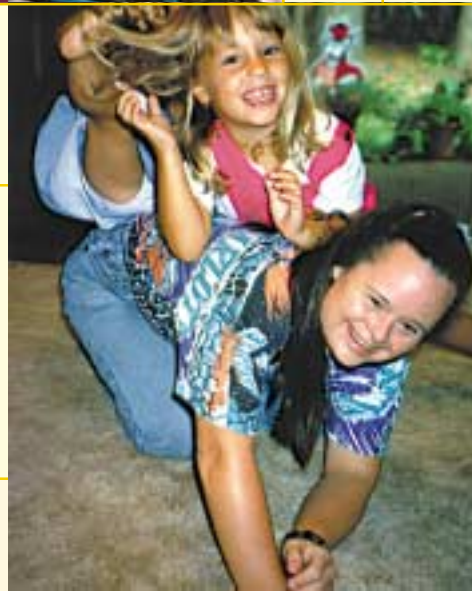


"I curl up with my favorite fantasy: spending the million dollars I win in the *Reader's Digest* sweepstakes."

What do you do . . . just for YOU?

Taking care of yourself is a way to show self-respect and self-love. It can also be a great stress reducer! We asked our contributors what they do just for themselves:

"Gardening and arts and crafts. Being with nature is a real stress reliever."



"Crafts, knitting, crocheting, sewing and reading. Sometimes I like to go shopping all by myself and do it leisurely. I like to go up and down all the aisles and look at everything."

"I like to rent a good movie. I snuggle up on the sofa with a blanket and my cat, and eat popcorn."



"Sometimes I take a long, hot bubble bath. I light candles and play classical music."

"I like to get in bed with a soda, the remote control and everything else I might need within reach—and veg out!"

"Driving to the beach to see the sunset. Or just driving and going—I enjoy my independence."



Susanna Bourgeois of the NC Department of Health and Human Services recommends, "Don't sweat the small stuff."

Stress SOS

Tips to chill by

WOMEN OFTEN LEAD STRESSFUL LIVES—juggling careers, children, family, and friends. And stress can greatly affect health.

The body's reaction to stress can lead to insomnia, back pain, colitis, high blood pressure, ulcers, and heart disease. Symptoms of stress may include rapid heart beat, rapid breathing, tense muscles, increased blood pressure, irritability, losing one's temper, lack of concentration and feeling anxious.

While you probably can't eliminate all stress, and some stress may help us to be productive, you can have more control than you thought. You can decide on ways to minimize the negative effects of stress on your health.

Check off ☒ the strategies that you are using and commit to trying out at least one new approach next week for managing stress.

- ☐ **Don't try to do it all.** No one expects you to be superwoman. Be realistic about your abilities and learn to say "no."
- ☐ When you feel overwhelmed, **take things one at a time.**
- ☐ Be willing to **ask for help** and to **share responsibilities**. Be honest with yourself and others about what you can and cannot do.
- ☐ **Share your feelings**; don't bottle things in. Look for people who will encourage you.
- ☐ For stressful situations that you can predict, **plan ahead**, and arrange a plan "B" in case things don't work out.
- ☐ **Do things you enjoy.** Maintain a variety of interests, activities, and relationships to help keep your mind off your worries.
- ☐ **Give yourself a break** from time to time—whether it's a walk around the block, some peace and quiet, or a real vacation.
- ☐ **Get enough sleep.** Limit your intake of caffeine and alcohol, which may rob you of sleep.
- ☐ **Exercise.** It's a great stress reducer and good for the mind as well as the body.
- ☐ **Build in relaxation time.** Meditate, practice yoga, think of pleasant things, or try to think of nothing at all.
- ☐ **Eat a healthy, balanced diet.** Eat regular meals—hunger can worsen stress.

Adapted from The National Women's Health Information Center
800-994-9662. <www.4woman.org/>