



Major Depression

What Is Major Depression?

Major depression is a psychiatric disorder in which people feel intense sadness, worthlessness, hopelessness, and helplessness for significant periods of time. These feelings surpass the normal “ups and downs” of everyday life and affect people’s ability to function. Between 10 and 15 percent of people experience major depression at some time in their lives. The disorder is more common in women than in men. The severity of major depression symptoms often varies over time, with episodes of more severe symptoms lasting several weeks or months.

What Major Depression Is Not

Major depression is not just temporary sad feelings, difficulties concentrating, or withdrawal from other people that occur during or after major life events. Major depression is also not the normal feeling of sadness and loss that is part of the grieving process following the death of a loved one. Major depression should also not be confused with the depressant effects of long-term substance use, particularly alcoholism. Sometimes dark and negative moods are associated with withdrawal from or cravings for substances. In early recovery, feelings of guilt, shame, grief, and regret typically arise. These are normal feelings as people come to terms with the consequences of their addiction. Experiencing and facing these feelings are important tasks of early recovery.

What Are the Primary Symptoms of Major Depression?

Major depression is diagnosed when people experience moderate or severe symptoms for at least a two-week period of time and when those symptoms affect ordinary daily functioning. Symptoms include

- persistent sad or irritable mood
- pronounced changes in sleep, appetite, or energy
- difficulty thinking, concentrating, and remembering
- physical slowing or agitation
- lack of interest in or pleasure from activities that were once enjoyed
- feelings of guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness, or emptiness

- recurrent thoughts of death or suicide
- persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain

What Is the Cause of Major Depression?

There is no single cause of major depression. It is believed that psychological, biological, and environmental factors contribute to its development. Genetics may also play a role.

What Are the Usual Treatments for Major Depression?

Treatment options for major depression include medications, psychotherapy, and electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). The most effective medications for major depression are antidepressants.*

Several therapy approaches are effective for depression, including cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and interpersonal therapy. Therapy can be provided either alone or in combination with medications. CBT works by helping people identify and challenge inaccurate and self-defeating thinking that contributes to depression, become involved again in enjoyable activities, and learn skills for having more rewarding interactions with other people. Interpersonal therapy helps people work through problems in current relationships while sorting through underlying causes for current behavioral patterns. Family psychoeducation can also be an effective treatment for major depression.

ECT is effective for severe major depression that has not improved with medications or therapy.

How Does the Use of Alcohol and Other Drugs Affect Major Depression?

Mood disorders, including major depression, exist in 30 to 40 percent of people with a substance use disorder. Among people with mood disorders, about one-third have a substance use disorder. These are the most common co-occurring disorders.

Drug and alcohol use worsens the symptoms of major depression and can increase the risk of relapses of depression, including suicidal thinking and suicide attempts. Mood disorders rarely improve while people are addicted to alcohol or drugs. Even with treatment, active alcohol and drug use can compromise the potential benefits of antidepressant medication and therapy.

* More information on antidepressants can be found in Handout 1, Antidepressant Medications.

How Does Major Depression Affect Addiction Treatment and Recovery?

Major depression may be difficult to diagnose during the initial phases of abstinence or early recovery because negative feelings and depressed mood occur for almost everyone during this period. Therefore, people with major depression may not have this disorder accurately detected and will thus go untreated. People with untreated major depression are at greater risk for suicide during early recovery, and they are more likely to leave treatment early and relapse. Sometimes, the symptoms of major depression appear only after a period of abstinence. The risk of suicide and relapse also exists if major depression goes untreated at this later appearance.

Treatment for Co-occurring Major Depression and a Substance Use Disorder

Effective treatment of major depression requires careful assessment of both disorders. For the person with a substance use disorder and major depression, treatment for the major depression without treatment for the substance use is less effective. Integrated treatment results in the best outcome. While in addiction treatment, a person can receive antidepressant medication, therapy, or both. These treatments reduce the risk of self-harm and also reduce the risk of relapse. To benefit from mental health treatments, patients should also receive treatment for their substance use disorder. Persons with major depression and addiction sometimes blame themselves or are blamed by others when they are trying to recover from their co-occurring disorders. Both addiction and mood disorders are diseases—not problems of willpower, character, or fortitude—and thus, no one is to blame. People with major depression can benefit from attending peer support groups, and they can also benefit from connecting with others who have these co-occurring disorders and are in recovery.

Resources

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