



Depression

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Depression

A person who feels sad all the time, has unexplained crying spells, or loses interest in usual activities may have major depression, a serious medical illness that should be distinguished from normal temporary feelings of sadness after a loss, such as the death of a relative or friend. The January 18, 2006, issue of *JAMA* includes an article about depression. This Patient Page is based on one previously published in the June 18, 2003, issue of *JAMA*.

SYMPTOMS OF MAJOR DEPRESSION

Having at least 5 of these symptoms occurring nearly every day for at least 2 weeks:

- Feeling sad or empty
- Decreased interest or pleasure in activities
- Appetite change with weight loss or weight gain
- Decreased or increased sleeping
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Feeling worthless or guilty
- Being either agitated or slowed down
- Difficulty thinking or concentrating
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide

OTHER TYPES OF DEPRESSION

- **Bipolar disorder** (previously called **manic-depressive disorder**)—occurrence of episodes of major depression and episodes of abnormally elevated mood called mania (severe) or hypomania (less severe)
- **Dysthymia**—mild depression symptoms lasting for at least 2 years
- **Postpartum depression**—a mother's depression occurring after the birth of her baby
- **Seasonal affective disorder**—major depression occurring regularly in seasons with low sunlight

TREATMENTS FOR DEPRESSION

- **Medications**—Several types of antidepressant medications have been shown to be effective for depression, but they must be taken for several weeks before they begin to work.
- **Psychotherapy**—Several kinds of “talking therapies” have also been shown to be effective for depression. They involve evaluating and changing the thoughts, attitudes, and relationship problems that are associated with depression.
- **Bright light**—Daily exposure to bright light can be helpful for seasonal depression.
- **Electroconvulsive therapy**—A series of treatments involving passage of electric current through the brain while the patient is under anesthesia can often relieve even severe depression. These treatments are usually given about 3 times per week for several weeks.

Anyone who is experiencing symptoms of depression should be evaluated by a doctor. Although individuals with depression often feel that nothing can help them, effective treatments are available. Evaluation and treatment are particularly important to prevent suicide. Suicide usually stems from depression.

Sources: American Psychiatric Association, National Institute of Mental Health, Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, National Mental Health Association

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American Psychiatric Association
www.psych.org
- National Mental Health Association
www.depression-screening.org
- Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance
www.dbsalliance.org
- National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page link on *JAMA*'s Web site at www.jama.com. Many are available in English and Spanish. The following related Patient Pages have been previously published: one on suicide in the May 25, 2005, issue; one on postpartum depression in the February 13, 2002, issue; one on electroconvulsive therapy in the March 14, 2001, issue; one on adolescent suicide in the December 26, 2001, issue; and one on psychiatric illness in older adults in the June 7, 2000, issue.

