

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.

