

The Low-down on Depression

By Donna Henry

Ben is a firefighter and married father of two. He is well liked by his friends, co-workers, and members of his community church. Ben is finding it more and more difficult to deal with day to day stress. He finds he has no interest in activities he once loved. He has realized that he feels sad and hopeless throughout most of the day, and has begun drinking just about everyday. Ben doesn't like going to the doctor and has kept telling himself that eventually he will start to feel better. It hasn't happened yet and Ben struggles with feeling powerless to change. He wonders how he can feel anxious, restless, angry, and exhausted all at once. He never seems to be able to get enough rest. His wife tells him he's just being lazy, but some days, it's all he can do to get out of bed.

Justine is a single mother of one who works two jobs. In her spare time she cares for her elderly grandmother and her sister's two children. Since her relationship ended, she hasn't felt good about herself and struggles with feelings of guilt and shame. She has no desire to go out with friends, exercise, or even apply for that good-paying job someone told her about. She has felt like this before in the past, but it always goes away after a while. This time, the feelings seem worse.

Depression is a medical condition that affects the brain and body. It is the leading cause of disability worldwide. The National Institute of Health defines depression as "an illness that brings a persistent sad, anxious or "empty" mood, feelings of hopelessness and pessimism, and other symptoms that interfere with the ability to work, study, sleep, eat and enjoy once pleasurable activities." The symptoms last two weeks or more and can be different for each person. Many people report feeling a decrease in energy, difficulty concentrating and making decisions, memory problems, irritability, physical complaints such as chronic pain, headaches, and constant fatigue, and even thoughts of death.

Men and women often experience depression differently. Women commonly report feeling worthless, sad, and guilty. Women can also experience what has become known as post-partum depression or "baby blues", after the birth of a child. Symptoms can begin a few days after delivery and usually only last seven to ten days after the birth. However, for about ten to fifteen percent of mothers, these feelings of depression persist. This is a very serious condition that requires emotional, therapeutic, and oftentimes medical support. Men more frequently report feelings of frustration, irritability, exhaustion, and a loss of interest in things they once enjoyed. They are more likely than women to use alcohol or other substances, increase workload and work time, and engage in risky or dangerous behaviors to help cope with these feelings.

There is no single reason people become depressed; however, scientists know that there are several risk factors that increase an individual's chances. Brain chemistry, a family history of depression, and psychological and environmental

factors can all contribute to developing depression. Brain chemicals called neurotransmitters help cells in the brain communicate with each other. When neurotransmitter levels are not even, depression can occur. Family genes tell us a lot about our risks of heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. They also tell us a lot about our risk for mental health issues like anxiety and depression. If a person has a family member with depression, chances increase that he or she can be affected. Depression can also be triggered by trauma, loss, family disruption, or difficult experiences in a person's social, personal, or work life. Some individuals are able to bounce back easier than others, while some have been able to recover quickly in the past, but find themselves more and more susceptible to "blue moods." Help is available to anyone who wishes to end depression.

Men and women with depression who are willing to seek help understand that depression is not a reflection of a personal failing or lack of strength. They understand that depression does not define a person; it is not who he or she is. It is a real illness that is afflicting them every day, and seeking assistance for depression is just like seeking help for cancer, heart disease, or a broken bone. Depression has real symptoms, real consequences, and there is real help.

Treatment

As a rule, more than 80 percent of people improve when they receive appropriate treatment for a depressive disorder. In seeking treatment, the first step is to see a medical provider to rule out any other possible source for the symptoms the individual is experiencing. A variety of treatments are available for depression. Of those proven effective, medications and therapy are the most common and the most effective. Medications, usually in the form of antidepressants, act to balance chemical levels in the brain. Antidepressants are usually started at a low dosage and then raised to a comfortable and effective level. A medical provider or psychiatrist can prescribe antidepressants. Therapy is an effective strategy for managing and ending depression. Learning alternative ways of thinking about issues, strategies for tackling problems, and coping skills are all a part of therapeutic treatment.

There are some strategies which you can do now that may help you. Socializing with other people and participating in activities can help you begin to feel better. Pace yourself and take things one small step at a time. Manage overwhelming tasks by breaking them down into smaller more approachable action plans. Try to incorporate exercise into your daily schedule. Even ten minutes of walking can help you feel better. Remember that depression will respond to treatment. To make a choice towards wellness and a healthier state of being, contact the Iliuliuk Family and Health Services Behavioral Health team. We can help you start working toward a happier you. Call Nancy or Donna and make an appointment today! 907-581-1202 x138 or x134

If you are thinking of harming yourself or you know someone who is, contact someone who can help immediately. Call 911, go to your local hospital emergency room, or call Public Safety who will contact Behavioral Health. You are too important not to!

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