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# M E S S E N G E R A P

INVEST  
**EAP**  
Employee Assistance Program

## Supporting a Healthy Organization

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### DEPRESSION: AWARENESS MATTERS

What is the leading cause of disability across the globe? Accidents? Infectious disease? According to the World Health Organization, the surprising answer is depression, a common and potentially devastating mood disorder as old as humankind itself. The ancient Greeks called it melancholia, literally "black bile." Today, the blackness takes hold of more than 23 million adults Americans every year. The costs to society are staggering, both economically--an annual toll of \$70 billion for American businesses--and in terms of human suffering. Although a range of effective therapies makes depression highly treatable, the majority of patients don't seek treatment and the emotional and financial toll mounts, needlessly and sometimes tragically.

Educating yourself about depression is important because even if you don't face the disease in your own life, it's likely that a friend, colleague or family member will. Like the ripples from a stone dropped in a pond, depression's effects radiate outward to loved ones and co-workers. According to the Surgeon General, "spouses, children, parents, siblings, and friends experience frustration, guilt, anger, financial hardship, and, on occasion, physical abuse in their attempts to assuage or cope with the depressed person's suffering."

As the Surgeon General's report on mental health explains, while few patients go to the doctor specifically seeking treatment for a mood disorder, "depressed people are significantly more likely than others to visit a physician for some other reason." Doctors who don't have a lot of time to listen may rush to investigate physical symptoms without recognizing the underlying cause. And patients, in search of "a less stigmatized explanation for their difficulties... undergo extensive and expensive diagnostic procedures and then get treated for various other complaints while the mood disorder goes undiagnosed and untreated."

The reverse can also happen. A busy

doctor may not be willing to wade through a complex set of complaints, and instead dismiss a patient as "just depressed," write a prescription for the latest heavily marketed drug, and send someone away with an undiagnosed autoimmune illness or incipient heart disease. Both outcomes remind us how much awareness matters in seeking and receiving proper medical treatment.

Being informed about depression is especially critical. The disheartening nature of the illness--and the way it disrupts normal thinking patterns--can lead a depressed person to withdraw instead of reaching out for help. A concerned friend may be in a better position to see that something is wrong than the person living through the anguish and confusion. A leading national patient organization estimates that "despite its high treatment success rate, nearly two out of three people suffering with depression do not actively seek nor receive proper treatment." Untreated, the disease can be fatal: depression causes two-thirds of all suicides in the United States, and untreated depression is the number one risk factor for teen suicide.

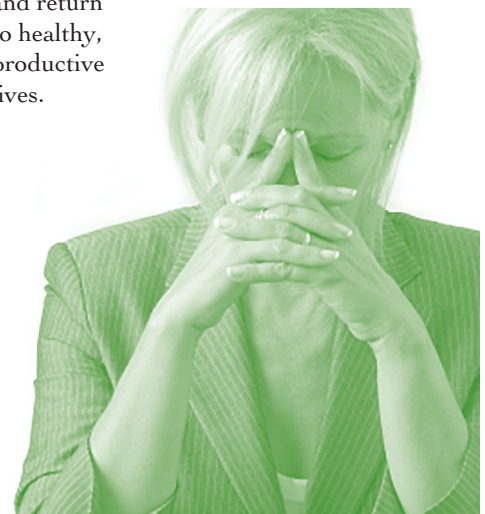
What exactly is depression? It is a complex disorder that affects the body, mind and spirit, interfering with everyday functioning and the enjoyment of life. The list of possible symptoms is long, but in general depression disrupts cognitive processes (how you think) as well as emotional ones (how you feel). It can also disturb normal patterns of sleeping, eating and daily activity. At work or school, productivity diminishes; inefficiency, frustration and absenteeism increase. At home, relationships are strained: the normal ups and downs of family life become more burdensome than joyful.

The constellation of symptoms varies among patients, as does their severity and duration. Across all cultures and age groups, women come down with depression twice as often as men (with the exception of bipolar disorder, which affects men and women equally).

One theory is that variations in hormonal levels make women more vulnerable to the disruptions in brain chemistry that underlie mood disorders like depression.

The genders also experience depression differently. Women are more likely to seek and receive treatment, while men, according to the National Institutes of Mental Health, often mask their depression with alcohol or drugs, "or by the socially acceptable habit of working excessively long hours." Depressed men typically feel "irritable, angry and discouraged" more than hopeless and helpless. Depression also manifests itself differently in children and the elderly, who are thus particularly vulnerable to being misdiagnosed or having their behaviors overlooked or dismissed as age-related.

In learning about depression, it is also important to understand what depression is NOT. It is not just sadness in response to stressful or even tragic events. It is not a mark of personal weakness, or a character flaw; it is not a sign someone just needs to "pull themselves together" or "snap out of it." Depression is a medical condition that needs to be diagnosed and treated like any other illness. Patients need support and compassion to overcome the disease and return to healthy, productive lives.



## SYMPTOM CHECKLIST

Depressed patients experience symptoms that vary widely. What they have in common is a significant impairment in carrying out and enjoying normal daily activities. Having five or more of the following symptoms for two weeks signals that depression may be present:

- ✓ **prolonged sadness or unexplained crying spells**
- ✓ **feeling anxious, pessimistic or hopeless**
- ✓ **feeling guilty, worthless or helpless**
- ✓ **no longer enjoying activities that were once pleasurable**
- ✓ **decreased energy, increased fatigue or sluggishness**
- ✓ **sleep disturbances: insomnia, early waking, sleeping excessively**
- ✓ **difficulty with concentration, memory or decision-making**
- ✓ **feeling restless, irritable or short-tempered**
- ✓ **headaches, stomach upset or chronic pain**
- ✓ **unusual changes in appetite or weight**
- ✓ **thoughts of death or suicide**

If you notice a cluster of these symptoms in yourself or a loved one, seek help. Resources and treatment strategies are abundant, so there is no need to suffer in silence.



Employee Assistance Program

**EAP SERVICES**

## DEPRESSION BASICS AND TREATMENT OPTIONS

If you take a hard fall off a bicycle and a jagged thighbone fragment is suddenly protruding from the skin, it doesn't take a sophisticated level of medical knowledge to know you have a broken leg that requires immediate treatment. Depression may feel as painful as a fractured femur, but the symptoms are outwardly much less obvious. It is hard to recognize clearly, when you're in the middle of it, that you need medical help.

There are three principal types of depression: **major depression**; **dysthymia**, a chronic low-level depression; and **bipolar disorder**, characterized by alternating episodes of depression and mania. Depression can be a primary illness, occur alongside another condition (such as anxiety, anorexia, or diabetes), or even result from a serious medical event like stroke, cardiac surgery or cancer. Like many illnesses, depression--especially bipolar disorder--can run in families.

What causes depression is the subject of much scientific debate and research. A combination of genetic, psychological and environmental factors may make someone prone to depression. A chronic state of stress or a traumatic life event can trigger the disease process. While scientists are still trying to unravel depression's causes, they can clearly see its results on brain chemistry. Imbalances occur in the levels of neurotransmitters, the brain's communication chemicals, producing disruptive and persistent physical, cognitive and psychological symptoms.

The good news is that many effective therapies exist to manage depression.

Treatment strategies often combine "talk therapy" (counseling) with medication, and peer support groups and crisis lines also provide valuable help. It is important to keep in mind, however, that treatment is not "one-size-fits-all." Numerous psychotherapeutic strategies and several classes of medications have decades-long track records of helping depressed patients.

The wealth of newly available drugs to treat depression, however, is both a blessing and a curse. Medication is often life-saving for depressed patients, and pharmaceutical companies have been developing and marketing new drugs aggressively. The truth is that science is only beginning to unravel the mysteries of brain chemistry, and even the researchers who develop the drugs don't understand exactly how and why they work. A specific medication that works wonders for your neighbor might prove completely ineffective for your mailman or cause devastating side effects in your child. Effective doses vary widely as well--the general principle of "start low and go slow" is important for all psychoactive medications. Be wary of a doctor who wants to dash off a prescription for a full-size dose of the latest heavily advertised depression "wonder drug" and hustle you out of his office without a comprehensive plan for follow up and support.

By definition, depression feels isolating. The key is reaching out for help: for yourself, or to a colleague or loved one who may feel alone in their struggle. With 23 million other Americans dealing with depression, you are definitely not alone.

## RESOURCES

- ☞ **Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance:** [www.dbsalliance.org](http://www.dbsalliance.org); 800 826-3632. Educates and supports patients, families, and the public. Comprehensive website offers an online screening test and a library of free downloadable brochures.
- ☞ **National Institute of Mental Health:** [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov). Excellent booklet on depression, downloadable (<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression/nimhdepression.pdf>) or available in print by calling 866-615-6464.
- ☞ **Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health.** For the chapter on depression, go to: [www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mentalhealth/chapter4/sec3\\_1.html](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mentalhealth/chapter4/sec3_1.html).

EAP is here to help. For more information about articles in this newsletter, or any other EAP-related topic, please call one of our trained counselors at our toll-free number:

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