An Overview of Depression

Depression is a serious medical condition that affects the body, mood, and thoughts. It affects the way one eats and sleeps, one’s self concept, and the way one thinks about things. A depressive disorder is not the same as a passing blue mood. It is not a sign of personal weakness or a condition that can be willed or wished away. People with a depressive illness cannot merely “pull themselves together” and get better. Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months, or years. Appropriate treatment, however, often involving medication and/or short term psychotherapy, can help most people who suffer from depression.

Depression can strike anyone regardless of age, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, or gender; however, large-scale research studies have found that depression is about twice as common in women as in men. In the United States, researchers estimate that in any given one-year period, depressive illnesses affect 19 million Americans.

Types of Depression

**Major Depression** (or major depressive disorder) is manifested by a combination of symptoms that interferes with the ability to work, study, sleep, eat, and enjoy once pleasurable activities. A major depressive episode may occur only once; but more commonly, several episodes may occur in a lifetime. Chronic major depression may require a person to continue treatment indefinitely.

**Symptoms of Depression**

- Persistent sad, anxious, or “empty” mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed, including sex
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being “slowed down”
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- Trouble sleeping, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping
- Appetite and/or weight changes
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts
- Restlessness, irritability
- Persistent physical symptoms, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain, which do not respond to routine treatment.

**Dysthymia** (or dysthymic disorder), a less severe type of depression, involves long-lasting symptoms that do not seriously disable, but keep one from functioning well or feeling good. Many people with dysthymia also experience major depressive episodes at some time in their lives.

**Symptoms of Dysthymia**

- Appetite and/or weight changes
- Trouble sleeping, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping
- Decreased energy, fatigue
- Low self-esteem
- Poor concentration or difficulty making decisions
- Feelings of hopelessness
Bipolar Disorder (or manic-depressive illness) is another type of depressive illness. Bipolar disorder is characterized by cycling mood changes: severe highs (mania) and lows (depression), often with periods of normal mood in between. Sometimes the mood switches are dramatic and rapid, but usually they are gradual. When in the depressed cycle, an individual can have any or all of the symptoms of depression. When in the manic cycle, the individual may be overactive, over-talkative, and have a great deal of energy. Mania often affects thinking, judgment, and social behavior in ways that cause serious problems and embarrassment. For example, the individual in a manic phase may feel elated, full of grand schemes that might range from unwise business decisions to romantic sprees and unsafe sex. Mania, left untreated, may worsen to a psychotic state.

Symptoms of Mania

- Abnormal or excessive elation
- Unusual irritability
- Decreased need for sleep
- Grandiose notions
- Increased talking
- Racing thoughts
- Increased sexual desire
- Markedly increased energy
- Poor judgment
- Inappropriate social behavior

Substance use disorders (abuse or dependence) also frequently co-occur with depressive disorders. Research has revealed that people with alcoholism are almost twice as likely as those without alcoholism to also suffer from major depression. In addition, more than half of people with bipolar disorder type I (with severe mania) have a co-occurring substance use disorder.

Men are more likely than women to report alcohol and drug abuse or dependence in their lifetime; however, there is debate among researchers as to whether substance use is a “symptom” of underlying depression, or a co-occurring condition that more commonly develops in men. Nevertheless, a substance use can mask depression, making it harder to recognize depression as a separate illness that needs treatment.

Depression and Medical Illnesses
Depression has been found to occur at a higher rate among people who have other serious illnesses such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, HIV, diabetes, and Parkinson’s. Symptoms of depression are sometimes mistaken for inevitable accompaniments to these other illnesses. However, research has shown that the co-occurring depression can and should be treated, and that in many cases treating the depression can also improve the outcome of the other illnesses.