

## Depression

Everyone gets "the blues" or feels "down in the dumps" occasionally. Moods can fluctuate from day to day, or hour to hour, sometimes for no reason at all. Changes in environment can affect moods. Any significant stress, such as going to college, establishing and ending relationships, success or feelings of failure in school, or experiencing losses can result in a sad mood. Most often these "down" periods last a couple of days to a few weeks. Occasionally, a down mood persists longer than a few weeks and the feelings become more intense. As a result, changes in thinking, behavior, and self-esteem are evident. If these feelings persist and become more intense, a "clinical depression" may result.

### Signs of Depression

We know that depression is a "whole-body" illness, involving our body, mood, and thoughts. It affects the way we eat and sleep, the way we feel about ourselves, and the way we think about things. Below is a list of symptoms that are typical of clinical depression. Not all of the symptoms are required for a diagnosis of depression.

- **Persistent depressed, sad, or "empty" mood**
- **Lack of interest or pleasure in activities that were once enjoyable (from schoolwork to sex)**
- **Decreased energy, fatigue, being "slowed down"**
- **Frequent feelings of worthlessness, low self-esteem, hopelessness or inappropriate guilt**
- **Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness**
- **A substantial change in appetite, eating patterns, or weight**
- **Insomnia or hypersomnia nearly every day**
- **Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide**

### Types of Depression

Depression comes in many forms and each individual can experience it differently. Depression might be in response to a stressor you can identify. This type of depression (*Adjustment Disorder*) usually resolves itself within six months. *Major Depression* is a more severe depressed mood that may not be in response to anything in particular and may last for a longer period of time. An episode of *Major Depression* may occur once, twice, or several times in one's lifetime. The episodes typically last 6 to 12 months. One type of *Major Depression* is *Seasonal Affective Disorder* (SAD) where depression is experienced during a certain time of the year (typically winter). This is more common in the northern latitudes (such as northern Idaho). *Dysthymia* is a persisting form of mild depression (lasting at least two years) where one's mood is not as down as *Major Depression* but one feels depressed for most of the day, for more days than not. A less common form of depression is *Bipolar Disorder* (formerly called "manic-depression"). *Bipolar Disorder* involves cycles of depression and elation or mania.

### Causes of Depression

Depression is a multi-determined disorder, caused by a combination of factors. Each person is unique and the relative contributions of each factor can be different. Some relevant factors are:

- **Biochemistry:** Deficiencies in two chemicals in the brain, serotonin and norepinephrine, are thought to be responsible for some of the symptoms of depression.
- **Genetic:** Some types of depression run in families. If your parents or other relatives have depression, you may be more likely to struggle with depression.

“ Psychological: Some ways of thinking and behaving can contribute to depression, i.e., negative thinking, unrealistic expectations, or all or nothing thinking.

“ Environmental: Exposure to significant stressors or long-term exposure to stressful situations can increase vulnerability to depression. Also, the amount of daylight can trigger Seasonal Affective Disorder.

## **Treatment**

### **Self-Help**

If your depression is not severe, or has not lasted for a long period of time, there are many things you can do to help yourself. These include:

“ **Reduce or eliminate use of alcohol and drugs (These are often used to feel better, but physiologically, they can increase depression.)**

“ **Keep up your normal routine and activities even though you may not feel like it**

“ **Get regular exercise**

“ **Eat regular and nutritious meals**

“ **Get adequate sleep**

“ **Seek emotional support from friends and family**

“ **Increase positive thinking**

If your self-help efforts are not effective and your depression persists for several weeks, becomes more severe, or leads to self-destructive thoughts or behavior, you should seek professional help.

### **Professional Help**

The two primary ways of treating depression are psychotherapy and/or medication. Consultation with a mental health professional (psychologist, psychiatrist, counselor, or social worker) will help you determine the best treatment for you. There are currently a variety of highly effective interventions available for the treatment of depression. Eighty to 90% of people with depression improve with treatment.

### **Psychotherapy/Counseling**

A variety of psychotherapeutic approaches are available for treating depression. Cognitive (or cognitive/behavioral) approaches focus on helping people change the negative styles of thinking and behaving often associated with depression. Interpersonal therapy focuses on dissatisfying interpersonal relationships that both cause and exacerbate depression. Other therapeutic approaches include psychodynamic therapies, humanistic/existential approaches and narrative therapy. Most mental health professionals utilize a variety of techniques based on the individual needs and wants of the client.

**Medication:** There are a variety of types of medication that are currently used to treat depression, each of which works a little differently. Your symptoms, medical history, and family history often give clues about the best medicine for you. Still, it may take time to find the one that works best for you and has the least side effects.

### **Need Additional Help?**

North Idaho College counseling services offer free group and individual counseling/psychotherapy for these and related issues for NIC students. For more information or to schedule an appointment, stop by Student Health & Counseling Services (2<sup>nd</sup> floor of SUB) or call 769-7818. All appointments are strictly confidential.