



Dealing with Depression

What Everyone Should Know



AMERICAN
COLLEGE
HEALTH
ASSOCIATION

When a relationship ends, you learn that your parents are separating, or you experience the death of a loved one, life can feel painful. You may also start feeling down when living away from home for the first time or struggling to master difficult courses.

College students who are living on their own for the first time, developing new relationships, exploring new identities, and challenging old ideas often experience a range of emotions. In most cases when these emotions are uncomfortable, time and self-help are the best ways to deal with bouts of low self-esteem and occasional feelings of being sad and overwhelmed. However, at times, students may experience prolonged or more severe depressive feelings, and further evaluation and treatment may be needed.

What Is Depression?

Depression is a serious condition that can affect your mood, thoughts, and physical health. It is not a sign of personal weakness or a matter of just feeling down.

Individuals who are depressed may experience a combination of the following:

- persistent sad, anxious, or “empty” feelings
- loss of interest or pleasure in ordinary activities, ranging from schoolwork to sex
- feelings of hopelessness, pessimism, guilt, worthlessness, and helplessness
- sleep disturbances (e.g., insomnia or oversleeping)
- eating disturbances (e.g., decreased or increased appetite or weight)
- decreased energy, fatigue, and feeling slowed down
- thoughts of death or suicide; suicide attempts
- increased restlessness and irritability
- difficulty concentrating, remembering, and making decisions
- physical symptoms—such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain—that don’t respond to medical treatment

What Causes Depression?

There are many interrelated causes of depression, including biological, genetic (family history of depression), and psychological (life stressors and coping styles) factors. Other factors to consider include:

- difficulty coping with life events
- changes in your life—both positive and negative
- gender-related hormonal changes
- brain injury
- medication side effects
- health conditions
- chronic pain
- substance abuse
- relationship problems and concerns
- death of a loved one
- divorce or separation
- academic or job difficulty
- unrealistic standards
- traumatic events

Why Seek Help?

Depression is treatable, and things will get better. However, without treatment, depression can get worse, reoccur, make life more difficult, interfere with academics, or create other health issues, such as substance abuse, anxiety, and an inability to manage anger. Many people don’t get treatment because they don’t realize they’re depressed, they blame the depression on personal weakness, or they’re so depressed that they can’t reach out for help. They may think, “What’s the point—I’m hopeless,” or “I should take care of my problems alone,” or they may have simply forgotten what it feels like not to be depressed.

What Can I Do?

Though you may feel exhausted, apathetic, irritable, or bored, keep up a healthy routine. The three most important things you can do on your own are to eat nutritious, balanced meals, and get adequate sleep and regular cardiovascular exercise. Going to class, spending time with family and friends, and continuing hobbies you used to enjoy are also helpful. Avoid alcohol, drugs, and excessive use of caffeine.

Speak with your family and friends—get some support and learn how they’ve overcome depression if applicable. Check with your campus or community health or counseling center for ideas and support. Don’t prolong it. Help yourself, even if right now you feel hopeless, exhausted, or trapped.

Do I Need Professional Help?

Getting help is a sign of strength, not weakness. With professional help, you can speed up your recovery and short-circuit relapses. In general, you should get professional support if your attempts at self-help are ineffective, and your depression:

- persists for several weeks.
- becomes more severe.
- leads to self-destructive thoughts and behavior.
- significantly interferes with daily functions.

Masking Depression

Sometimes an individual’s behavior can signify an underlying depression more than feelings can. Seek professional help if you are:

- having difficulties with alcohol, other drugs, tobacco, or food.
- practicing unsafe sex or “sex with regrets.”
- driving recklessly.
- vandalizing property or stealing.
- behaving in other ways that you believe—or your friends tell you—are destructive.

If You Feel Suicidal

If you think that life isn't worth living anymore, and you are thinking of acting on these feelings, ask for help. Suicidal feelings can be intense, and talking with a close friend, relative, counselor, or member of the clergy will give you some relief from the pain and help the thoughts and feelings pass. Suicide hotlines are also available (see "For More Information" below).

Helping Someone Who Is Depressed

You aren't responsible for your friend's depression, but you may use the following suggestions to assist a friend in need:

Listen. Allow your friend to express their feelings. Although you may be tempted, don't try to give advice or take charge. Just listen.

Be honest and direct. Speak directly to your friend and share your concerns. Be specific: if a friend's behavior or comments frighten you, say so. Don't try to be superficially cheerful, but do reassure your friend that depression is treatable and offer alternatives that are available.

Be supportive. Don't deny or minimize your friend's pain. Don't try to talk your friend out of any feelings or make judgmental comments about them. Avoid labeling your friend.

Show that you care. Stay in touch and stay interested. Be patient. Offer to assist a friend in making a call to a mental health professional.

Turn off distractions. Turn off your cell phone, iPod, computer, etc., when talking to your friend. Give them your full and undivided attention.

Know your limits. If you start feeling angry or frustrated because your friend doesn't seem to be listening or changing, explain that you need time and will continue the conversation later. You may find that short, periodic discussions work best.

If you have a friend who you believe is denying a serious depression, you may want to speak with a mental health professional for assistance. Let your friend know you're concerned. Be genuine while asking your friend whether they are depressed and continue asking questions that encourage honesty. Keep an open mind about how your friend evaluates their situation and use the listening skills listed above.

How Do You Know If a Friend Is Suicidal?

There is no foolproof checklist for identifying a suicidal person. Suicide, like most human behavior, is impossible to predict. Suicidal thoughts, statements, or gestures are always serious. Get professional help immediately, even if you don't think your friend truly wants to die. A suicidal gesture is serious and may accidentally result in permanent injury or death.

Warning Signs of a Suicide Attempt

Warning signs that a person may be preparing for a suicide attempt include:

- directly or indirectly threatening to hurt oneself or talking about wanting to hurt or kill oneself.
- displaying the symptoms of serious depression listed in this brochure.
- increasing use of alcohol or other drugs and increasingly engaging in high-risk activities such as reckless driving or physical fights.

- getting the means for killing oneself (e.g., buying a gun, stocking up on sleeping pills).
- expressing feelings of hopelessness or having no purpose or reason to live.
- giving away possessions.
- statements indicating a desire to "get even" with significant others.
- discussing death or dying, the hereafter, wills, and other legal matters related to death.

In addition, studies have shown that people who have attempted suicide in the past are at risk for repeating an attempt, and people who have relatives who attempted suicide are often more likely to make attempts.

Helping a Friend Who Is Suicidal

Use the listening skills described in the section on helping a depressed friend, but don't back off. In addition:

- Ask your friend if they are thinking about killing themselves. Ask directly, even though it might feel awkward. Your question will relay that you understand the seriousness of your friend's struggle.
- Explain to your friend that you're concerned about the situation.
- Find out if your friend has a specific plan for committing suicide and how far they have gone in carrying it out. Remove any means available (e.g., guns, knives, pills).
- Let your friend know the importance of getting help and that treatment can really make a difference.
- Get your friend professional help immediately. Contact your college counseling center, a suicide prevention hotline, hospital emergency room, or local crisis center.
- Make an agreement with the person that they will not attempt suicide.
- Check in with your friend to continue to see how they are doing.

Some things **not** to do:

- Don't assume the situation will take care of itself.
- Don't leave your friend alone.
- Don't be sworn to secrecy.
- Don't act shocked or surprised by what your friend says.
- Don't challenge, dare, or use verbal shock treatments.
- Don't argue or debate moral issues.
- Don't offer alcohol or drugs to cheer up your friend.

Once the immediate crisis is over, encourage your friend to get follow-up care. Keep in mind that a quick recovery from suicidal feelings may be your friend's attempt to deny—consciously or unconsciously—the intensity of the depression and that the suicidal feelings may return.

Trying to help someone who is suicidal can be scary. Consider getting professional advice and support for yourself. And remember that you are not responsible for the impossible—you can encourage a friend to get professional help, but you cannot stop someone intent on committing suicide.

Professional Treatment

Several kinds of treatment are available. Work with a mental health provider to decide which one (or combination of treatments) is best for you. Try different methods—it may take a little while to find the best approach for you. Between 80–90 percent of all people with depression respond to treatment. Mental health experts agree that the most effective method of treating depression is a combination of counseling, medication, and self-help activities.

Psychotherapy. Several forms of talk therapy have been shown to be very helpful. Therapy may be short- or long-term; focus on behavior, thinking, feeling, or some combination of the three; and involve interacting with a therapist individually or as part of a group.

Medication. Various prescription drugs have proven effective in treating depression. Prescription medications may have unpleasant side effects and you may need to try more than one to find the right anti-depressants for you. These drugs should always be used under a health care provider's supervision.

For More Information

Mental Health America

Toll Free: (800) 969-6642
www.mentalhealthamerica.net/faqs

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

24-hour Hotline: (800) 273-TALK (8255)
TTY: (800) 779-4889
www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

National Institute of Mental Health

www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression-and-college-students/index.shtml

American College Health Association

(410) 859-1500 | www.acha.org

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