

## UNDERSTANDING AND OVERCOMING DEPRESSION

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Everywhere we turn these days, it seems, there's bad news - about people losing their homes, their jobs, their savings. The latest casualty of our economic meltdown: the Scharffenberger chocolate factory in Berkeley is closing. Now that's depressing!

Seriously, though, when times are tough, we can expect more people to be depressed, because it's natural to feel sad, discouraged or just plain "down" whenever bad things happen. Most people are able to cope with adversity and will bounce back from feeling depressed fairly quickly (within 4-8 weeks). But some people don't seem to be able to - what's wrong with them? And what can be done to help them?

First, what doesn't help: telling someone who's depressed to "snap out of it" or "get it together" or "stop feeling sorry for yourself." Very few people *choose* to feel depressed, so probably if they *could* pull themselves together, they would.

And it isn't because they're lazy or weak-willed. True **clinical depression**, which is different than your average sad mood, is a medical disorder, and is physical as much as mental or emotional. It's a "whole body disorder" that affects thinking, feeling, memory, and perspective, as well as physical energy, appetite, sleep, and perception of pain. It disrupts a person's ability to function in their work, family and personal life. It's not the same as grief, but it can develop following a major loss or series of losses. And if left untreated, it may not go away, but instead could result in suicide.

One out of five people will experience a severe clinical depression at some point in their lives. Women are twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with depression, but that may be because they're more likely to go to a doctor, and more likely to tell someone else how they're feeling. In my practice, I see equal numbers of depressed men and women.

The good news is that there are very effective treatments for clinical depression which are readily available to almost everyone. Some depressed people respond well to medications like Prozac or Zoloft, which act on the brain neurotransmitter serotonin. Some will also benefit from medication to improve sleep and/or reduce anxiety; but all meds have side effects, they don't work for everyone, and it's rarely a complete solution.

**Cognitive - Behavioral Therapy** (CBT), which is based on the premise that you can change your mood and feelings by changing your thoughts and behavior, has been proven to be one of the most effective ways to treat clinical depression. It may be used on its own or in combination with medication. The new Mindfulness - Acceptance Therapy (ACT) is a variation of CBT that seems to help with mild or moderate depression.

Because clinical depression affects the whole body, good nutrition and regular exercise play a critical role in treatment, and indeed may be sufficient for mild cases. And some people have found relief from depression with acupuncture, herbs, yoga or Tai Chi. For more information on clinical depression, a good place to start is the MedlinePlus website, from the National Institutes of Health (<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/depression.html>), or contact me:

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