

Depression : A Mental Health Guide

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What is depression?

Major depressive disorder, more commonly known as 'depression' is a mood disorder which negatively impacts the mental health of an individual, affecting the individual's behaviour, feelings and daily functioning. Depression is characterised by intense feelings of sadness, hopelessness, worthlessness and complete disinterest in activities the individual once used to find joy in doing. For e.g. - An individual who used to love dancing, after being diagnosed with depression, gives up dancing and feels no interest or pleasure in doing it any more.

Intense feelings of sadness after life-changing events are natural, but if these feelings persist for a prolonged period of time, there is a good chance the individual might be suffering from depression. Depression, though a very dangerous disorder if ignored and neglected, is perfectly treatable if it is accepted and addressed at the right time.

Depression is a mental health condition that includes too many complex emotions and behaviours to just be restricted to just one major form. So, these are the most common types of depression:

1. **Major Depressive Disorder** : In this type, dark thoughts, negative emotions and intense feelings consume the affected individual for a prolonged period of time. It is a very severe manifestation of sadness which adversely impacts the daily functioning of an individual.
2. **Persistent Depressive Disorder** : Also called 'dysthymia', this condition is milder as compared to M.D.D. , but it still lasts for a prolonged period of time. Imagine it as an irritating cold that lasts two years or so.
3. **Bipolar Disorder** : Also known as 'manic depressive disorder', bipolar disorder is the epitome of an 'emotional rollercoaster'. The affected individual goes from an elated mood, bursts of energy, feelings of excitement to feelings of gloom, despair and hopelessness very quickly, which makes daily life very difficult.
4. **Seasonal Affective Disorder** : "I got that summertime, summertime sadness" Lana Del Rey always says it best. But unlike Lana, individuals suffering from this disorder usually experience a depressive mood during the days of winter. This condition is characterised by feeling listless and sad for most part of the days. SAD can be described as a mood disorder that follows the schedules of the seasons. One can only hope Lana writes a song named 'Wintertime Woes' soon.
5. **Postpartum Depression** : This condition affects women after they give birth to a child. It is characterised by feelings of sadness, anxiety and exhaustion. Affected individuals are also at a greater risk of developing M.D.D. in the future.
6. **Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder** : Have you ever seen those female hygiene product ads? The female uses their products once and seems to have achieved zen in life. That is most certainly never the case when women do suffer from premenstrual syndrome or PMS. PMS carries with it a very unique baggage of uncontrollable and intense mood swings , cravings, irritability, etc. Can you imagine that on steroids ? Well, that's what 'Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder' or PMDD is. This condition is usually experienced in the days leading up to women's menstrual period and can be described as a very severe version of PMS.

Common signs and symptoms :

Depression is a condition that manifests itself in varying ways. Sometimes, it is easy to recognize if a person is suffering from depression, but sometimes the signs can be more subtle and difficult to notice. So, these are some of the common signs and symptoms of depression that may make it easier for us to recognize and understand if an individual is struggling with the same :

1. Feeling sad or hopeless all the time
2. Loss of interest and will to do activities the individual used to enjoy doing
3. Loss of appetite and eating too little or overeating/binge eating
4. Lack of sleep/ insomnia or sleeping too much
5. Constant or persistent state of fatigue
6. Difficulty in concentration and focusing
7. Feeling worthless or guilty all the time, believing one is 'not good enough'
8. Irritability, snapping at people too quickly
9. Avoiding social gatherings or interactions of any kind, isolating oneself
10. Suicidal thoughts

It is important to note that these symptoms should last for more than two weeks and bring about noticeable changes in behaviour and functioning for them to lead to a diagnosis of depressive disorder.

Early Indicators:

1. Unpredictable mood swings can indicate the early onset of depression. One may go from feeling irritable one moment to unusually sad the next.
2. Noticeable changes in eating and sleeping. In case of sleep, one might sleep too much to avoid facing reality, sleep too little due to the unease of the mind and in case of eating patterns, one might lose their appetite and eat too little or try to find some sort of comfort in food.
3. Lack of interest is one of the telltale signs of depression. When an individual gradually loses interest in activities they once loved doing, it can be a strong indicator of depression.
4. Lack of focus and difficulty in concentration can indicate that a person starts detaching from reality, making it harder for them to come back , which can be an early sign of depression.
5. We may also notice that the individual is constantly tired and/or irritable. They might experience a constant feeling of fatigue. Irritability and anxiousness are common when depression is about to strike.
6. Feelings of self-doubt and questioning your self-worth are also common early indicators of depression.
7. We may also notice that the individual is more sensitive than usual. Imagine that their sensitivity is like a bulletproof vest that becomes just one layer thinner. The bullet will still not go all the way through and severely damage the person but it will definitely hurt them more than it would have if the bulletproof vest was as thick and resilient as usual. Things that normally wouldn't bother the individual seem to get under their skin and affect them more than usual.
8. Wanting to spend more time alone, avoiding social interactions and isolating oneself can all be early indicators of depression. The individual may unconsciously start wanting distance from friends and family.

Relevant Stats :

- According to WHO, about 264 million people around the world suffer from depression, which is approximately 3.4 % of the entire population.
- WHO states that about 7,5 % of Indians suffer from some mental disorder, and around 56 million people in India suffer from depression.
- NIMH states that around 21 million people in the U.S. alone have had at least one major depressive episode. This number constitutes about 8.3% of the U.S. population.
- According to recent statistics:
 - In India, approximately 1 in 20 people suffer from depression.
 - In the United States, it is estimated that 1 in 10 people are affected by depression.
 - Globally speaking, 1 in 15 people experience depression.
- Looking at the statistics on depression with respect to age groups, we may notice that :
 1. In the age group of 12-18, approximately 1 in 8 people suffer from depression.
 2. In the age group of 18-60, it's estimated that 1 in 10 people are affected by depression.
 3. In the age group of 61-80, 1 in 12 people experience depression.

Preventative Measures :

Some of the effective preventative measures for depression are as follows :

1. Getting lots of exercise can help the body as well as the mind be healthy. Exercise has been proven to release brain chemicals like endorphins which energise us and boost our mood. Making exercise a daily part of your workout can include going to the gym, practising yoga or even just doing simple home workouts.
2. A balanced diet is key in maintaining good physical as well as mental health. Proper nutrition with a diet rich in fruits and vegetables can help a person maintain balance of body as well as mind.
3. Sleep is also essential for helping our brain function smoothly. Can you recall a day when you had gotten barely 3-5 hours of sleep but you were still completely happy, carefree, alert and enthusiastic for the day? I'm guessing not a lot of instances come to mind, right? That is because getting a good amount of sleep plays a crucial role in deciding and regulating our mood which is why it is extremely important to regulate our sleeping patterns and get an adequate amount of sleep.
4. Stress management, a very important preventative measure, can be a very tricky and frustrating endeavour. But of course, there are techniques for that too. Practising meditation can be a productive start. Meditation is all about strengthening our mindfulness, which can help us to get to know ourselves better and create more of a balance. Other simple practices and habits like avoiding over committing to things, and learning to be okay with things you can't control can foster a concrete sense of security and stability in the mind.
5. In recent times, one of the most preventative measures would be scaling back the time we spend on social media. In extreme cases, the toxic nature of social media can lead to mental health issues like depression and anxiety, but even in milder cases, social media remains one of the main causes for the sense of distress and self-doubt that many young adults experience. We can practise this measure by deleting social media apps from our phone, or setting timers and creating boundaries and limits around how much time we spend on social media.
6. As the old saying goes, 'Man is a social animal.' which is why maintaining and nurturing social interactions is also an effective preventative measure for depression. By interacting

regularly with our friends and family, we may gain emotional support and be able to avoid feelings of loneliness.

7. Setting realistic goals can also be helpful in preventing depression. If we aim too high, of course we're gonna be disappointed when we don't achieve our goals. For example, if a person struggling with their body image decides they're going on a diet to start losing weight, they need to be realistic. If they expect their body weight to drop by 5 kgs, that's physically impossible for their body to do, and of course, they're going to be disappointed when they see the results are not what they wished for. This is why it's important to set realistic goals, which eventually makes it easiest to stick to them, too.
8. Establishing a well-rounded routine which consists of regular eating and sleeping patterns, exercise as well as relaxation can provide us with a sense of stability and structure. This in turn, will of course, be helpful in preventing depression.
9. Being kind and compassionate to ourselves may not seem like much but it goes a long way. When we are kind to ourselves as we would be to a friend, and unconditionally accept ourselves, the chances of developing depression can be significantly reduced.
10. Cutting out alcohol and nicotine consumption. People often resort to alcohol or nicotine as a way to relax, but sometimes, they take it too far, and the consumption itself becomes a problem. This is why cutting out the use of alcohol and nicotine altogether or at least setting strict boundaries can be an effective preventative measure for depression.
11. We've all heard the old idiom, "Cross a bridge when you come to it" which means that we should address a significant problem only when we are faced with it. But why not try and avoid the bridge altogether? If one experiences the signs and symptoms of depression slowly developing, it is only rational to try and seek professional help to nip it in the bud. Whenever we have a cold, do we not go to the doctor? Of course we know the cold is not life threatening but we still seek medical help out of concern for our physical health. In the same way, it is important to extend the same courtesy to our mental health and seek professional help before depression reaches harmful lengths.
12. Engaging in our hobbies and favourite activities can also be an effective preventative measure for depression as it boosts our mood and keeps us energised.

Ice-Breakers

1. Simple questions like "How was your day?" or "How are you feeling today?" go a long way. These can encourage the individual to respond however they like, whether briefly or in detail, making it easier to open up to you."
2. Reassuring the person that you're a constant presence in their life and there for them when they need someone to talk to can foster a sense of comfort and peace between you and the affected individual, making it easier for them to communicate with you about their struggle.
3. Encouraging the individual to talk about their thoughts, concerns and what's been bothering them with simple questions like, "What's been on your mind lately?" can also be very helpful. Voicing their concerns and saying their thoughts out loud can help them deal with it better.
4. Another effective ice-breaker can be asking them about their hobbies and interests, steering the conversation towards more light-hearted and positive subjects.

5. Offering to do things together, such as going out to visit places or eat, taking a nice, peaceful walk together can distract them temporarily and fill their mind with more positive thoughts.
6. Asking how they've been taking care of themselves can also be an important way to start a conversation about depression. While tackling the issues of self-care and confirming whether the affected individual is looking after themselves, it can also help to show them that you care about them and are concerned for their well-being, which will help in establishing a sense of comfort and friendship. This, of course, will help the individual be more open and honest with you about their issues.
7. Talking about their dreams and plans for the future can also be an effective ice-breaker as it will help the individual be more positive and hopeful about themselves.
8. Discussing common interests, such as what books, movies, TV shows they like can also be very effective in bringing you and the individual closer together. There is nothing that brings two people close like art does. Thus, discussing shared interests can be a very effective way to strengthen your friendship with the affected individual and strengthen values of trust, compassion and belonging.