

## What is Depression?

The word “depression” can be a little confusing as it is often so overused. For example: we often hear people say things like, “I got so depressed when the team lost.” While someone might be sad, disappointed or upset about daily events, real depression is much more significant than these reactions and can have much more serious affect on someone’s daily life.

Understanding the symptoms of depression can help you to identify depression risk in yourself or others and can assist you in deciding if professional help could be of benefit. For most people with this illness, symptoms may last two weeks or longer and fall into one or more of four general categories: *thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and physical well-being*. Within these categories, the most common symptoms of depression include:

### Thoughts

- Negative thinking (e.g., “The world is an uncaring place”)
- Hopelessness” (e.g. “Nothing will ever get better no matter what I try.”)
- Catastrophic thinking (e.g., “Everything is going to turn out badly”)
- Difficulty concentrating or paying attention
- Frequent thoughts of death or thoughts of suicide

### Feelings

- Sad, down or depressed mood that may not have any specific or apparent cause
- Loss of interest in normal activities or lack of pleasure in life
- Sense of worthlessness or guilt
- Shame
- Anger

### Behaviors

- Isolating from others; not calling friends, family, or other supports
- Change in activity: Less active, slowed down; or more agitated or restless
- Reduced productivity
- Eating too much or too little or a change in normal appetite
- Smoking or drinking alcohol more than usual
- Irritability (noticeable to you or others)

### Physical Well-being

- Fatigue, low energy or no energy
- Changes in sleeping patterns (e.g., insomnia or sleeping more than normal)
- Tension or nervousness

- Changes (either increase or decrease) in appetite or weight
- Loss of sex drive

## Challenging Depression Myths

Too often, mistaken assumptions about depression prevent individuals from getting the help they need.

Some of the most common “myths” about depression include the following:

- Depression is a relatively uncommon illness
- Depression is a sign of personal weakness or a lack of willpower
- Depression is something people can snap out of if they try hard enough
- Depression is not a real illness; it’s all in your head
- Depression is just another term for sadness
- It’s normal for everybody to be depressed sometimes

In fact, depression is a common illness and affects a large section of the U.S. population each year. Depression causes more disability than any other illness – including heart disease. It is a real illness and “snapping out of it” is simply not an option for people affected by the disease.

Sadness can contribute to or be the result of depression, but they’re not the same. What makes depression different from sadness is that depression interferes with almost all personal functions and it is more persistent. While sadness, loss and other life challenges face all of us, not everyone experiences depression as a result.

Loved ones of those who suffer depression can experience frustration or impatience. It can appear that if a depressed person would just “try harder” he or she could feel better. While those with depression can certainly take steps to get better, depression is not something that someone can just “shake off”. Those with depression often describe the experience as feeling as if they are deep in a hole and that it seems impossible to get out of it.

The belief that depression reflects a personal weakness or character flaw often interferes with someone getting the help that they need. For example, people with depression may experience:

- Hopelessness and a feeling that depression will never go away
- Lack of motivation and energy, feeling too exhausted to seek help
- Guilt or shame about symptoms
- A sense of isolation that prevents them from reaching out to others
- Feeling that symptoms are a sign of personal failure, weakness or a punishment

## Treatment Works

The best news about depression is that many treatment options help people manage or eliminate depression symptoms. Those who take an active part in participating in their treatment often experience the most relief. Much like those who suffer with diabetes, those with depression find that their daily choices about medication, exercise, nutrition and sleep management can have a marked effect on their condition.

Common treatment options are briefly described below. For additional information about treatment see EAC’s “Available Treatment Options for Depression.”