Mental Health: Depression

Everyone occasionally has bouts of sadness, but these feelings are usually fleeting. When a person has a depressive disorder, it interferes with daily life and normal functioning. It is a common but serious illness.

There is no single known cause of depression, but it likely results from a combination of genetic, biochemical, environmental and psychological factors. Depression commonly coexists with other illnesses, such as anxiety disorders or alcohol/substance abuse. It can affect anyone at any time, from children to older adults.

Types of Depression
There are several forms of depressive disorders, the most common being the first two:

• Major depressive disorder – characterized by a combination of symptoms that interfere with a person’s daily life; it is disabling and prevents a person from functioning normally.

• Dysthymic disorder – also called dysthymia, it is long-term (two years or longer) feelings of depression that are not extremely severe but still prevent a person from normal functions of daily life.

• Psychotic depression – occurs in conjunction with a form of psychosis, such as hallucinations or delusions.

• Postpartum depression – can occur within a year of giving birth. Symptoms include: sadness, lack of energy, trouble concentrating, anxiety and feelings of guilt and worthlessness.

• Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) – characterized by the onset of depression during the winter months, when there is less natural sunlight.

Symptoms
People with depressive illnesses do not all experience the same symptoms. The severity, frequency and duration will vary depending on the individual and the illness. Symptoms may include:

• Persistent sad, anxious or “empty” feelings

• Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and/or hopelessness

• Irritability, restlessness, and/or fatigue

• Loss of interest in activities once pleasurable

• A dramatic change in appetite

• Insomnia

• Thoughts of suicide

Diagnosis and Treatment
Depression is a highly treatable disorder. The first step is to visit a doctor, where he/she will perform a medical examination and rule out factors that may be causing the condition, such as certain medications or a thyroid disorder. Once diagnosed, a person will likely be treated with psychotherapy and/or medication. In the meantime, it is important to exercise, participate in activities, spend time with friends and relatives, and think positively. It is also wise to postpone any major decisions, such as marriage or a career change, until feeling better.

Helping Those Affected
Knowing a depressed person can affect you too. The most important thing to do is to help him/her get an appropriate diagnosis and treatment. Other ways to lend a hand:

• Offer emotional support, understanding, patience and encouragement.

• Be a good listener.

• Never ignore comments about suicide; report them to your friend’s relative or doctor, or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at (800) 273-TALK.

• Invite your friend to do things with you; if he/she declines, keep trying, but don’t push.

• Remind your friend that with time and treatment, the depression will lift.

For more information, visit the National Institute for Mental Health Web site at www.nimh.nih.gov.

Did you know…?
According to the National Institute of Mental Health, by age 15, girls are twice as likely as boys to have experienced a major depressive episode.