

Male Depression

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Definition: Depression is a common condition affecting between three and four million men in the United States at any given time. Symptoms of depression include the following:

- Feeling generally blue or down
- Crying for no reason
- Decreased energy
- Guilt feelings
- Decreased of self-esteem
- Irritability
- Social isolation
- Decreased libido
- Increased or decreased appetite
- Insomnia
- Unable to enjoy one's usual activities
- Thoughts of death

Differences between men and women: Depression in men presents somewhat differently than in women. Men are taught early on to stay in control and they are more likely than women to express anger when problems cannot be readily solved. Thus women are more likely to discuss their feelings of sadness or depression, while men attempt to keep them hidden. Men therefore report less sadness while at the same time reporting more fatigue, restlessness, irritability, agitation and various physical symptoms. Attempts to relieve depression may take the form of overworking, abusing alcohol, gambling, and sexual indiscretions.

Triggers: Typical triggers of depression in men include the following:

- Relationship difficulties
- Separation and divorce
- Feeling unable to measure up to one's standards
- Unemployment or underemployment
- Retirement
- Aging or feeling physically weaker
- Lack of pleasurable outlets
- Sensing a lack of purpose in life

Men's experience of depression: Typical reports from depressed men include the following:

Harsh self-criticism and shame, which derive from feeling unable to accomplish one's goals such as being a good husband, father, or provider. Unable to cope with the array of negative feelings, the man may begin to blame others for his difficulties. This may lead to the self-fulfilling prophecy of feeling uncared for and being rejected. Because he was trained to shun feeling weak or unmasculine, he may attempt to redirect his energy outward. This may lead to angry

outbursts or substance abuse. This type of depression is heavily defended against and even denied making it very difficult for loved ones to be helpful to the man.

Since men are often uncomfortable with both feeling and expressing emotions, they are prone to withdraw emotionally and become uncommunicative. For many men expressing feelings involves vulnerability and self-doubt and can be experienced as a challenge to the masculine identity. Social and emotional withdrawal makes it difficult to seek or receive help.

Depressed men will frequently get caught up in a stream of negative views of himself and others. The depression and its associated negative feeling states are frequently communicated to others through unpleasantness and anger, leading to distress in loved ones. Thus depression exacts a significant cost in those around the depressed individual as well as the individual himself. Communication is difficult and comfort and intimacy tend to break down.

Helping: Approaching the depressed man requires great patience and skill. Even if he presents as angry and withdrawn, it is important to try to remember that, deep down, your partner feels unsettled doesn't like how he feels. Sometimes the best approach is a direct conversation about his mood difficulties. This can be stated as, "Honey, I'm so worried about you and how stressed you seem lately. Maybe you need some help with this and maybe you are going through some kind of depression. It would mean a lot to me if you would see someone about this to check it out." However, some men may balk at the suggestion that they have a problem and will require other approaches.

Sometimes it is helpful to call depression something else—perhaps stress. This is a more neutral term and may be less likely to make the man feel you are calling him weak. It is also quite helpful to let the man know that you care about him and want things to be better for him. This joining technique lets the man know that he is not alone in this and that he has the support and care of a loved one. Try not to react to his negative statements. These may come in the form of blaming you or others or saying that it is useless or hopeless to seek help. This is how depression can affect one's thinking and judgment. Being persistent with supportive statements about the availability of help and how much he is cared about may offer the support he needs even if it is not well-received at first. You may also find "active listening" to be effective. This approach focuses on actively hearing what the other person is saying. It includes, paraphrasing, clarifying, and offering a personal example of the situation being discussed. In addition, because men are so sensitive to criticism, it is important to avoid falling into that trap. Thus, one might use attentive or loving strategies, such as touch or physical affection when attempting to get your message across. Sometimes the message "I really care about you" can be heard with the offer of a cup of coffee or the like. It can even be helpful to focus on one's own faults in order to open up a dialogue of what you would like your partner to change. The important point is to convey that we are all in this together and that he is not alone. What will help him will help everyone.

The most important thing in all this is that there are highly effective treatments for depression. In fact, some people believe that depression might actually have a beneficial aspect in that it may help the man better understand himself and his relationships. Even when a mood disturbance is

not severe, it may have a profound impact on the person's daily functioning.

The role of medication: Antidepressant medication can be an excellent source of relief for depressed individuals. However, many people who are depressed may also benefit from psychotherapy. Therapy offers a safe place to talk about one's life and its challenges. Specifically, it can help him cope with the typical negative thoughts that accompany a depression. Most importantly, therapy offers hope, and hope is the antidote to depression.

Self-help: There are things one can do on one's own to manage depression. These include:

- Exercising
- Eating right
- Reading self-help books on depression
- Rediscovering activities and relationships that offer enjoyment
- Setting realistic goals
- Being with others
- Challenging the negative self-talk
- Doing the opposite of what depression would have you do.

Hope: Depression is an illness. It is something to be taken seriously whether it is the "typical" depression or what is called the "male type" of depression. It affects all areas of a person's life. If untreated, the impact can be devastating. Fortunately, there is hope for the man and his family to free him from the grip of a depressive mood.