



Depression: Treatment Strategies and Options

If you think you might be depressed, you should schedule an appointment with your primary health care provider or a mental health professional (psychiatrist, psychologist, clinical social worker or mental health counselor) as soon as possible. One of the benefits of going to your primary health care provider first is that there are medications and medical conditions (e.g., thyroid disorders, electrolyte abnormalities, vitamin deficiencies) that can produce symptoms similar to those of depression. To rule these out, your provider may conduct a physical exam or run some lab tests.

Your provider also will ask detailed questions about your symptoms. To make your medical visit as easy and productive as possible, it will be helpful if you take detailed notes about what you have been experiencing to your appointment. The information should include:

- **A list of symptoms you have been experiencing, including their severity.**

Be as specific as you can. When did they begin? If they are not constant, then at what time or in what situations do they occur? What makes them improve or become worse? Have you ever had these symptoms before? If so, how long ago and how were they treated? How are these symptoms affecting your day-to-day life?

- **Any remedies you have already tried.**

Have you taken any over-the-counter medications? Have you changed your diet or any of your habits in an attempt to address the problem? If so, did your effort help?

- **A list of medications including nonprescription medications and nutritional supplements.**

One of the best ways to provide this information is for you to take all of your medications with you to your appointment. Also mention any treatments you are receiving that may not be strictly medical (e.g., acupuncture, chiropractic care, homeopathic care).

- **Any significant changes in your life recently** (e.g., illness or death of a loved one, difficulties in relationships with family or friends, new living arrangements, changes in finances, new responsibilities at home or at work or at your place of worship, change in your ability to handle household matters).

One more step you should consider as you prepare for your medical visit is to ask a family member or friend to go with you. If you think that it might be difficult for you to present all of the information that needs to be shared, to ask important questions or to remember exactly what is recommended, then ask someone to accompany you to your appointment.

Some primary care providers feel comfortable diagnosing and treating depression, while others want to refer you to a psychiatrist or other mental health professional after ruling out other medical conditions. If your provider concludes you are depressed and feels comfortable treating depression, you may be given a

prescription for an antidepressant medication. Be sure you have enough information about the specific medication you have been prescribed before you leave your appointment. Some of the questions you should ask are:

- What are the expected benefits of the medication?
- How long will it take for me to notice the benefits?
- How should it be taken and how often?
- Will this medication interfere with any of my other medications?
- What are the side effects of the medication? What should I do if I experience them?

Be sure to write down the answers to these questions and review your notes with your providers before you leave. If there is any reason why you might not be able to take the medication you have been prescribed, do not hesitate to mention this to your provider. Doctors and other health care providers understand and appreciate the fact that the latest and best medications for a medical condition is of no value if it not taken as prescribed. If the cost of the medication is the obstacle, explain this to your provider. Often, a less expensive alternative with similar benefits is available.

Antidepressant Medications

Antidepressant medications can be effective in relieving the painful symptoms of depression and helping restore you to your normal level of functioning, but it's important to have an understanding of how these medications are used and what to expect.

Antidepressants do not provide immediate relief. While you may feel a modest improvement in your mood within the first couple of weeks, it can take four to eight weeks for a significant therapeutic benefit to be felt. During this period, it is

important that you take the medication exactly as prescribed, stay in regular contact with your health care provider, and report any unpleasant side effects or other reasons why you are concerned about the drug (e.g., cost). Fortunately, there are several types of antidepressants and a number of options within each class. Your provider likely can find another option if a side effect or the cost of the medication is a problem. If side effects are not a problem but you're feeling little or no improvement after several weeks, your providers likely will want to adjust the dosage or substitute another type of antidepressant. This shouldn't be surprising or discouraging. It's not unusual for it to take some time to find the right medication and the right dose. Because this could take several weeks or even longer, it's often helpful to be working with a psychotherapist at the same time.

Once you have experienced relief from all of your symptoms, you will need to talk with your provider about exactly when and how the medication should be discontinued. Although patients are often tempted to discontinue antidepressants as soon as they have recovered, it is generally recommended that you continue taking the medication for another six to twelve months. Doing so reduces the risk of depression returning. And when you do discontinue the medication, you shouldn't do it abruptly. You will need to work closely with your provider to slowly and safely reduce the dose.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy, or what is often referred to as "talk therapy," has been found to be an effective treatment for mild to moderate forms of depression and it is often used in combination with medication. There are several types of psychotherapy, but all involve a collaborative and confidential relationship with a mental health professional. Sessions are typically 45-50 minutes in length and scheduled once a

week; however, more frequent sessions may be advisable at the beginning of therapy or during an especially difficult period.

The confidential nature of the relationship is essential, allowing patients to speak openly about their thoughts, feelings and experiences without fear of being judged or concerns about the information being shared with anyone else. Therapists are required by both their professional ethics and the law to maintain this confidentiality unless they believe there is an immediate threat to the safety of the patient or other persons, or if they learn of the abuse, exploitation or neglect of children, the elderly or people with disabilities.

The forms of psychotherapy for which there is solid evidence of their effectiveness in the treatment of depression are cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and interpersonal therapy (IPT). Both are generally considered short-term therapies – ranging from about five to twenty sessions. Therapists may combine elements of CBT with elements of IBT or other approaches. This is often referred to as “eclectic therapy.”

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

The objective of cognitive behavioral therapy is to help people identify and then modify unhealthy, negative thoughts and behaviors. Although past experiences are not ignored, greater emphasis is placed on the present – the beliefs and behaviors that are contributing to and maintain the depression. In addition to using therapy sessions to examine and modify negative beliefs, some of the time may be devoted to developing a schedule of mood and confidence-enhancing activities that can be carried out between sessions.

Interpersonal Therapy


Interpersonal therapy is short-term therapy that is especially effective when a person's depression is associated with a significant loss (e.g., death of a loved one, divorce), troubled relationships or being faced with new, unfamiliar relationships and responsibilities. It can help patients gain a better understanding of interpersonal issues, work through the emotions associated with these issues, and develop skills to meet new challenges.

Whatever the therapeutic approach, a strong collaborative relationship between you and your therapist is absolutely critical. You need to feel comfortable talking openly and honestly about your thoughts and feelings. One place to start your search for a psychotherapist is with your primary care provider or one of your other health providers. Ask if they know of a psychologist, clinical social worker or mental health counselor with experience treating depression. Another option available to many individuals is

their employer's Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

These programs typically provide free and confidential

assessments, short-term counseling, and referrals. Trusted family members, friends and members of the clergy also may be able to provide a recommendation. Searching online is another option. Most therapists have websites that provide information about their education, professional credentials and areas of expertise. They also may include how long they have been in practice, office hours, fees and whether or not they accept insurance.



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When you first meet a psychotherapist, don't hesitate to ask any questions, including questions about the therapist's training, professional license, certifications, experiences, fees and confidentiality. Another concern for some people is how their religious beliefs and practice are viewed by mental health professionals. If you have this concern, ask the therapist. Therapists and patients don't have to share the same faith, but it is important for therapists to respect and be sensitive to their patients' religious beliefs and practices.

While you shouldn't expect psychotherapy to produce instant results, you should expect to feel comfortable with your therapist and confident that the two of you can work in partnership. If you don't, talk to your therapist about what seems to be missing in the relationship. Perhaps a different approach would help. If this doesn't seem possible or prove beneficial, then it's reasonable to consider switching to a different therapist.

