

Understanding Major Depressive Disorder

This material aims to provide you with a better understanding of major depressive disorder and ways to manage the condition.

Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) is a mental health condition that affects people across all ages. It is characterised by a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest in activities. It can negatively affect how you feel, think and act.

It is common for people to experience low mood from time to time. However, if the feelings do not go away after a few weeks and you find that these feelings are getting in the way of your normal day, then it may be that you are experiencing depression. Understanding this condition is the first step towards managing it effectively.



Common Symptoms

During each episode of major depressive disorder, symptoms typically persist for nearly every day and may include:



Depressed Mood

Feeling sad, empty or hopeless most of the day or nearly every day.



Loss of Interest or Pleasure

Losing interest in activities that were once enjoyable.



Irritability

Angry outbursts, irritability or frustration, even over small matters.



Significant Weight Changes

Significant weight loss or gain, or changes in appetite.



Sleep Disturbances

Insomnia (difficulty sleeping) or hypersomnia (excessive sleeping).



Psychomotor Agitation or Retardation

Being noticeably more fidgety or slowed down in movements.



Fatigue or Loss of Energy

Feeling tired and lacking energy nearly every day.



Feelings of Worthlessness

Experiencing feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt.



Difficulty Concentrating

Having trouble focusing, making decisions, or remembering things.



Recurrent Thoughts of Death

Thoughts about death or considering suicide.

It is crucial to consult a mental health professional for an accurate diagnosis.

Causes and Risk Factors

A combination of factors can contribute to or increase the risk of developing major depressive disorder. These include:

- Genetic factors: A family history of depression may increase the likelihood of developing MDD.
- Neurochemical imbalances: Changes or imbalance in brain chemicals.
- Environmental factors: Stressful life events, such as trauma, major life changes, or ongoing difficulties in personal or professional life.
- Medical conditions: Certain illnesses (e.g., chronic pain or thyroid disorders) can contribute to or mimic depression.
- Substance abuse: The misuse of drugs or alcohol can trigger or worsen depression symptoms.
- Personality: Individuals who tend to view situations pessimistically or harbour low self-esteem might be more susceptible to stress and may consequently experience feelings of depression.



It is important to note that MDD is a complex condition and may not have a single identifiable cause in every case. Consulting a mental health professional can help in understanding the specific factors that may be influencing an individual's experience of depression.

Treatment Approaches for MDD

Major depressive disorder often occurs in episodes. This means that you may experience periods of severe depression followed by periods of better mood. Without treatment, it can disrupt every aspect of your life, affecting relationships, work and overall well-being. However, with proper care, many people experience significant improvement.

Major depressive disorder can be effectively managed through various treatment approaches including:

Psychotherapy

- Psychotherapy is a collaborative process where a psychologist works with individuals in finding ways to improve their well being.
- It involves talking with a trained psychologist in a safe and confidential setting.



Medication

- Antidepressant medications help regulate neurotransmitters in the brain which play a role in regulating mood and behaviour. They are usually prescribed by a psychiatrist.
- It is important to note that medication is not a "magic cure," but it may help alleviate symptoms. There are also possible side effects, hence it is important to discuss any concerns you have regarding medication with your healthcare provider.



Your healthcare provider will work together with you to determine the best approach for your unique situation. It is important to communicate openly with your provider about your progress and any concerns you may have.

What Can You Do For Yourself?

Physical well-being is closely tied to mental health. Engaging in a healthy lifestyle can improve overall mental wellness.

- Engage in regular physical activity, such as walking, jogging, stretching or dancing. Exercise releases endorphins, which are natural mood lifters.
- Eat nutritious and balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins and healthy fats. Avoid taking too much sugary or processed foods and excessive intake of caffeine and alcohol.
- Prioritise getting a restful sleep each night. Fix a regular sleep schedule and create a calming bedtime routine.
- Establishing a structured daily routine can provide a sense of purpose and stability. Include activities that you enjoy and can contribute positively to your well-being.
- Seek support from your trusted friends, family members and/or available support groups.
- Seek professional help early if you find it difficult to cope with life challenges on your own.



For Caregivers: What Can You Do for Your Loved Ones?

- Learn more about depression to better understand what your loved one is going through.
- Be a supportive listener and let them know that you are there for them.
- Encourage them to practise self-care (i.e. regular exercise, a balanced diet and sufficient sleep).
- Help to create a safe and supportive environment to promote their wellbeing.
- Regularly check in on them and encourage them to seek professional help if needed, especially when they have suicidal thoughts.



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about MDD

1. What is the difference between sadness and depression?

Sadness is a normal emotion that will pass while depression is persistent and can cause significant impairment in daily functioning.

2. How long does treatment take to work?

It varies from person to person. Some people may see improvements within weeks, while others may take longer.

Living with Major Depressive Disorder can be challenging, but remember that there is hope. Seek professional help, follow your treatment plan, and practise the recommended helpful strategies. Be patient with yourself as you work towards recovery. Remember that you are not alone in this journey. With time and support, recovery is possible.

Contributed by Psychology (Allied Health Services), Nursing and Medical Psychiatry

This brochure is produced for educational purposes and should not be used as a substitute for medical diagnosis or treatment. Please seek the advice of a qualified healthcare provider before starting any treatment or if you have any questions related to your health or medical condition.

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