

Depression

Every student experiences times of feeling down or sad. It is normal to experience a range of different moods, and to feel blue at times. However, negative feelings that extend beyond a few days and into weeks, or interfere with the ability to function and interact with others may be signs of a depressive episode. Depression is different from normal mood fluctuations in that symptoms are intense and lasting, and interfere with the ability to enjoy life. It can be difficult to recognize depression because symptoms may happen gradually, or one may misconstrue depressed feelings as evidence of personal failure. In reality, self-blame and feelings of worthlessness are common symptoms of depression and may stand in the way of seeking help. Often, a roommate, friend or family member may notice a problem before the person who is suffering realizes he/she is depressed.

Prevalence of Depression

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, depression is the leading cause of disability in the U.S. and worldwide. Approximately 18.8 million Americans are suffering from depression at any given moment. Approximately 9.5% of Americans over the age of 18 will have a depressive disorder in a given year, with twice as many women (12%) as men (7%) affected.

Symptoms of Depression

The following is a list of symptoms common to depression:

- feeling down or depressed much of the day
- lack of interest or pleasure in daily activities
- social withdrawal
- loss of appetite, overeating or digestive problems
- excessive sleeping, insomnia or early morning awakening
- loss of sexual desire
- physical complaints, such as headache, backache or other unexplained pain/discomfort
- physical agitation or restlessness chronic fatigue, loss of energy or lack of motivation
- feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, guilt or self-blame
- difficulty concentrating, impaired memory, indecisiveness or confusion
- neglect of physical appearance or hygiene
- irritability or rapid mood change
- thoughts of death or suicide

Causes and Treatment of Depression

The cause of depression is individual and multi-determined. Depression may result from a

combination of factors, including life stressors, personality factors, family or interpersonal problems, or brain biochemical imbalances. Because some medical conditions, such as thyroid dysfunction, can contribute to depression, it is important to have a medical check-up to rule out an underlying physical cause. Some people seem to have a biochemical predisposition to depression, and may suffer from recurring depressive episodes or chronic despondency. Often, a depressive episode can be linked to a loss or transition, such as a move or separation or a romantic relationship ending. In college, for example, the challenges of adjusting as a freshman or the stresses of senior year are common contributors to a depressive episode. A person is most vulnerable to depression when there is a perceived lack of support from others, or when he or she feels unable to express important feelings to loved ones.

Depressive symptoms may lessen without professional help. However, research indicates that the likelihood of a major depression recurring is higher when treatment is not sought. Treatment for depression has been shown to be quite effective. With appropriate treatment, over 80% of people with depression improve significantly. Depression may be treated with therapy, or a combination of therapy and medication. Anti-depressant medication is likely to be recommended when depression is moderate to severe, or when symptoms don't resolve with psychotherapy. Anti-depressant medication is not habit-forming, and usually begins to help with symptoms within a few weeks. The commonly used newer anti-depressants (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors or "SSRI's") tend to have fewer side effects than the older medications (e.g. tricyclics, monoamine oxidase inhibitors).

How to Cope with Depression

The symptoms associated with depression often make it difficult to function, and may lead to feeling even worse about oneself. For example, sleeping too much and missing classes can result in academic problems, adding to feelings of worthlessness or self-blame. Not feeling up to socializing because of depression may lead to an even greater sense of disconnection from others.

The following strategies can be helpful when dealing with depression:

- Practice good self-care, including getting adequate rest, nutrition, and exercise.
- Express your feelings to trusted friends or family members.
- Avoid alcohol and drugs. Using substances may provide some temporary relief, but ultimately adds to depressed feelings.
- Remind yourself that you are suffering from depression, not a personality defect or other weakness. Recognize that many people experience depression at some time in their lives and that depression can be useful in pointing out problems that need attention. By addressing these underlying concerns, you will ultimately become a healthier person.
- Address problems you have been avoiding, recognizing that avoidance makes problems even worse.
- Seek help from a professional.

For More Information

Union College students are invited to schedule confidential counseling sessions with an experienced, caring psychologist for help in coping with depression. The Counseling Center also provides consultation about how to help a friend or loved one who may be suffering from depression. Appointments can be made by stopping by the front desk of the Wicker Wellness Center, or by calling (518) 388-6161.