

Depression and Marriage

Depression is a mental illness that can negatively affect both partners in a marriage.

Headlines and Trends

Approximately 19 million people in the United States are diagnosed with depression per year. In addition, women are diagnosed with depression twice as much as men. Studies indicate that nearly everyone in the United States will be affected by their own depression or that of a friend, parent, child or spouse at some point in their life.¹ Coping with depression within a marriage can obviously be extremely difficult. Not only does it affect the person who is diagnosed but also their spouse and other family members.

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According to the National Depression and Manic Depression Association, untreated depression costs the United States an estimated 43 billion dollars a year due to absenteeism from work, lost productivity and medical costs.² Although depression is recognized as a mental health disorder, there is still a stigma attached to the diagnosis. Depressed people often feel ashamed and embarrassed. Many people consider depression to be an indication of flawed character. Furthermore depressed people sometimes believe that their depression is their fault. In one research study, fifty four percent of those surveyed believed that depression is a personal weakness.³

Many people suffering from depression feel alone and isolated and have great difficulty reaching out for help. Managing depression can be much easier with the help of a spouse and other family members. Being in a marriage where one partner suffers from depression can be overwhelming and confusing for the non-depressed spouse. The spouse can often feel frustrated, angry or hurt by their partner's behavior. Many people experience feelings of guilt, shame and embarrassment when dealing with depression as there is still a stigma attached to the illness.

Depression can affect marriage in a very negative way with an increase in marital dissatisfaction. Couples dealing with depression are at higher risk for divorce.⁴ The partner of a depressed spouse needs to become educated about the nature of depression and treatment options that are available. The spouse needs to learn not to personalize their partner's behavior. Encouraging their partner to seek help and being supportive of their partner's treatment will be particularly helpful.



Background

Depression can take a huge toll on a marriage. When one spouse suffers from depression, studies show that both spouses will report an unhappy marriage. The more anxious or depressed a spouse is the more unhappy they are likely to be in the marriage. Relationships in which one spouse is depressed are more likely to divorce than marriages where no depression is reported. When chronic depression enters the marriage an avalanche of negative patterns begins. Depression can be thought of as being “contagious” in terms of how it affects lifestyle. The entire family can begin to display the traits of social isolation, avoidance, negative interaction and other symptoms of depression.

It can be hard to differentiate between common marital problems and the subtle signs of actual depression. What appears as marriage problems may in fact be manifestations of depression. Conversely, marriages where one partner has untreated depression will certainly have an increase in marital distress. While suffering from depression there is usually an absence of feelings of love and intimacy. When this occurs a partner may assume that they are no longer in love with their spouse. There can be profound feelings of isolation and a depressed atmosphere that permeates the marriage. These feelings can contaminate moods, outlooks, activities and behavior. Becoming educated about depression and options for treatment is essential for any couple suffering from the illness.

Definition

Depression is a complex issue that affects emotions, thinking, behavior, physical health and relationships. According to The DSM-IV- Diagnostics and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, depression falls into three types of recognized categories described as follows⁵:

1. **Major depression**—a combination of symptoms that interfere with the ability to work, sleep, enjoy activities and sustain relationships for a consecutive period of over two weeks. Major depression can be a one time occurrence but is often experienced episodically throughout a lifetime.
2. **Dysthymia**—a milder form of depression that is characterized by chronic feelings of depression that lasts more than two consecutive years.
3. **Bi-polar disorder**—characterized by cycling mood changes, severe highs (manic) and lows (depression).

7 Common Signs of Depression

1. Sadness
2. Sleep Disturbance
3. Change in Appetite
4. Feelings of isolation
5. Loss of pleasure in activities
6. Social withdrawal
7. Anxiety

Feelings of depression may reoccur throughout the life span. It is however considered a highly treatable illness.⁶

Men and women experience depression differently. The following table indicates some common manifestations of depression by gender.

Depression in Men	Depression in Women
Fatigue	Sadness
Irritability	Feelings of Guilt and Worthlessness
Loss of Interest in Activities	Post-partum Depression (hormonal)
Sleep Disturbances	Premenstrual syndrome (hormonal)
Additional risk: Drug and alcohol abuse	Additional risk: Transition to Menopause

Potential Causes. There are many causes of depression. Scientific evidence supports the idea that depression is caused by an imbalance in brain chemistry that affects the way neurotransmitters, specifically serotonin and norepinephrine, are processed. People who are depressed generally have insufficient levels of serotonin and norepinephrine in their brain.

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Life events such as trauma, loss of a loved one or other negative occurrences combined with a biochemical and genetic predisposition may create a manifestation of depression. Many mental health professionals believe that childhood loss or trauma may play an important role in the experience of depression as an adult.

Genetics. There is also a genetic component to depression; depressed people often have a family history that is positive for depression. Studies of identical twins found that if one twin is depressed, the other twin is 70% more likely to experience depression episodes.⁷

Treatment. Getting treatment for depression is essential; it does not just “go away”. One of the first steps in treating depression is to get a complete medical exam to rule-out other physical conditions such as infection, thyroid problems and hormone imbalances. After a complete physical, a psycho/social evaluation with a mental health professional needs to be conducted. Ideally, the mental health practitioner and Physician will work together to manage and treat the patient’s illness.

Some of the common treatments for depression include psychotherapy and anti-depressant medications. Commonly used anti-depressant medications such as zoloft, prozac, effexor and celexa can be very effective in treating depression but they can have uncomfortable side effects. Medication can help balance the neurotransmitters in the brain. Non-traditional treatments such as acupuncture and herbal remedies can also be beneficial for people suffering with depression. It is important to consult with your therapist or physician before beginning use of any prescription drug.

Psychotherapy can include “talk” therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy. Management of depression should also include a good diet, exercise, getting enough sleep and relaxation. Depression is highly responsive to a combination of psychotherapy and medication. Eighty percent of those treated for depression show a marked decrease of symptoms.

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Depression is an illness that can devastate a marriage. Couples can work together to overcome the obstacles of depression. There are many resources available for couples experiencing depression in their marital relationship. Working together, a couple can work to save their marriage from the overwhelming effects of depression.

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Citations and Additional Resources

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