

Depression and Mental Health

Introduction

In any given 1-year period, 9.5 percent of the population, or about 18.8 million American adults, suffer from a depressive disorder¹. A depressive disorder is an illness of the body and mind. It affects a person's mood, how they sleep, what they eat, and how they think and act. Depressive disorders cause terrible amounts of pain and suffering to those with the disease as well as to their family, friends, and co-workers. Depressive disorders can threaten and destroy the life of the ill person as well. Most people with this type of illness do not seek treatment, although the majority of those with this illness can be helped. Again, this is a serious illness that *can* be treated.

Types of Depressive Illnesses

There are different types of depressive illnesses.

1. Major depression
2. Dysthymia
3. Bipolar disorder

Other types of mental health issues not discussed in this article include the following:

- ❖ Anxiety Disorders (Obsessive Compulsive, Panic, Post Traumatic Stress, Social Phobia)
- ❖ Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD, ADD)
- ❖ Autism Spectrum Disorders (Pervasive Development Disorders)
- ❖ Borderline Personality Disorder
- ❖ Eating Disorders
- ❖ Schizophrenia

Symptoms

Please note that not everyone diagnosed with a depressive disorder experience all of the symptoms listed below. Some people will experience more symptoms than others will. Each symptom may vary in severity and in duration. *Not all symptoms listed below.*

- Prolonged and consistent sadness
- Pessimism
- Restlessness and / or Irritability
- Harmful thoughts or suicide attempts
- Appetite loss / gain or Weight loss / gain
- Insomnia
- Feelings of hopelessness, guilt, or worthlessness
- Fatigue
- Loss of interest in things that were once fun or pleasurable

Causes

The main contributor to depressive illnesses is related to changes to brain structures or function. Some forms of depression can be passed from generation to generation. This seems to be the case with bipolar disorder. Those with the disease have been found to have a different genetic makeup than those without the illness. Although one might have the makeup does not mean that they will actually contract the illness. Stress (home, work, family, and school) can also contribute to the onset of the illness. Other contributing factors are financial difficulty, a difficult personal relationship, stress (welcome or unwelcome), a chronic or debilitating illness, pregnancy, or a major loss such as the death of a loved one. Many times it is a combination of psychological, genetic, and environmental factors that contribute to one having a depressive illness.

Treatment

There are many ways to treat depressive disorders. **The first and most important step in treating depressive illnesses is to obtain an evaluation from a medical professional.** This person will perform an evaluation to obtain information that will help decide how to treat the illness. Depressive disorders are treated based on individual symptoms and circumstances. A few examples of different types of treatments include medications, herbal therapies, and psychotherapies (talk therapy).

Support

As a City of Gainesville Employee you have up to three FREE visits per year with a psychologist through Clinical Psychology and Associates. This is part of the Employee Assistance Program.

**To make your free appointment please call:
352-336-2888.**

Counseling Services: Marital/Family, Drug/Alcohol, Emotional, Harassment/Abuse,
Financial, Work Issues

**Clinical Psychology and Associates
of North Central Florida, P.A.
2121 NW 40th Terrace, Suite B
Gainesville FL 32605**

There are many different organizations that provide further information about depressive disorders. Below are a few high quality websites:

National Institute of Mental Health (very comprehensive website with very good information on a variety of different mental health topics)

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/NIMHHome/index.cfm>

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (excellent info about finding support groups and other info about “living with depression”)

<http://www.dbsalliance.org/>

The Cleveland Clinic (high quality medical information)

<http://www.clevelandclinic.org/>

Exercise, Depression, and Mental Health

Exercise, when used as the only form of treatment for depression, is classified as an alternative therapy. An alternative therapy is considered a health treatment that is not classified as standard western medical practice. Alternative therapy encompasses a variety of disciplines that include everything from diet and exercise to mental conditioning and lifestyle changes. Examples of alternative therapies include acupuncture, guided imagery, chiropractic treatments, yoga, hypnosis, biofeedback, aromatherapy, relaxation, herbal remedies, massage, and many others.

If you have depression and are considering using an alternative form of therapy, it is important to seek the advice of your healthcare provider. There is no evidence that any alternative treatment is effective for treating moderate to severe depression². For some people, however, they may be used as an *addition* to other treatments -- providing relaxation, relief from depressive symptoms, and helping you cope with some of the causes of depression such as grief, anxiety, changing roles, and even physical pain.

We, here at LifeQuest, believe this to be true. We believe that proper exercise, when used under the guidance of a medical professional, can benefit someone suffering from depression and help him or her find enjoyment in life. How does it do this?

Regular exercise has been proven to:

- Reduce stress, anxiety, and depression
- Boost self-esteem
- Improve sleep

Exercise also has these health benefits:

- Strengthens the heart
- Makes the body better able to use oxygen
- Builds energy levels
- Lowers blood pressure
- Improves muscle tone and strength
- Strengthens and builds bones
- Helps reduce body fat

Studies of mice show that those that run in exercise wheels for a good part of the day develop more nerve connections and healthier nerve cells in the portion of the brain where learning and memory reside than their sedentary littermates³.

A study, published in the February 2003 issue of the *Journal of Gerontology: Medical Sciences*, found significant differences in the areas of the brain most affected by aging, which varied according to the fitness levels of the study participants. According to the researchers, the brain loses an average of 15% to 25% of its tissue between the ages of 30 and 90, and most of these losses are in the areas associated with memory, learning, and other thinking-related processes. The research found that older adults show a real decline in brain density in white and gray areas, but that fitness actually slows that decline. It wasn't that fitter people had better brain densities; it was that exercise decreased the amount of brain-tissue loss associated with aging⁴.

Some scientists believe that exercise may increase the concentrations in the bloodstream (and therefore the brain) of the neurotransmitters serotonin and norepinephrine, as do certain antidepressant drugs⁵.

Some people believe that group exercise helps manage their depression and aids in maintaining good mental function⁶. Scientists still are learning about why this is true. Is it exercise's effect on brain chemistry? Is it the boost to self-esteem? Is it the fellowship people gain when they exercise together? Or is it all of the above?

A lot of the specifics about how exercise helps depression and mental health are yet to be determined. Yet, there is a lot of evidence that supports the fact that exercise can and does help depression and mental health, and that is what is important!

References

1. Robins LN, Regier DA (Eds). *Psychiatric Disorders in America, The Epidemiologic Catchment Area Study*, 1990; New York: The Free Press.
2. <http://www.clevelandclinic.org/health/health-info/docs/2200/2274.asp>
The Cleveland Clinic
Department of Patient Education and Health Information
9500 Euclid Ave. NA31 Cleveland, OH 44195
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