

# Depression and Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)



When facing the challenges of a spinal cord injury (SCI), you may feel discouraged, sad, or down at times. If these feelings are severe, lasting, or cause loss of hope, they may be symptoms of depression. Depression is a mood disorder. It's caused by certain chemical changes in the brain. Anyone can have it, but it tends to run in families. Depression can be triggered by many factors, including the challenges of a physical injury. People with SCI have a higher rate of depression. If you think that you might be depressed, know that this problem can be treated. This sheet tells you more about how to recognize the symptoms of depression and what can be done to help relieve them.



## Symptoms of depression

People who are depressed often have 1 or more of these 3 symptoms:

- Feeling sad, guilty, worthless, or hopeless most of the time
- Losing interest in hobbies and activities
- Withdrawing from family and friends

In addition, a depressed person may also:

- Feel tired all of the time or low in energy
- Have trouble sleeping or sleep more than normal
- Lose interest in eating or eat too much
- Turn to alcohol or drugs to feel better
- Think about suicide or death
- Neglect specific care measures needed after SCI

If you have any of these symptoms, let your healthcare provider know right away. Help is available.

## Treatments for depression

When a person is depressed, they often feel like nothing will ever make it better. But depression can be successfully treated. Medicines and talk therapy (counseling) have helped many people. Medicines act on the

brain chemicals that affect moods and feelings. Counseling involves talking about feelings and learning ways to change thought patterns. There are many types of counseling for depression. Some people meet one-on-one with a therapist. Others prefer a group setting. Often, a combination of medicines and counseling is used. A mental health professional can help figure out which treatment options might work best for you.

## Preventing depression

You can take certain steps to help reduce your risk of depression. Try to stay aware of your thoughts and moods. Tell your loved ones or members of your healthcare team early if you think there might be a problem. Ask for a visit by a person who has coped with SCI for a while and who is trained as a peer counselor. Make an effort to stay involved with others and in your own life. When you have interests that keep you challenged and fulfilled, it may be easier to find things to stay positive about. Keeping your body strong and healthy may help as well. This allows you to remain active, so you can continue doing things you enjoy and that help you feel good about yourself. If you need ideas for ways to stay active and healthy, talk to your healthcare team. Their role is to support you and help you live well.

## Help for severe depression

When you're depressed, you may feel as though life isn't worth living. People with an SCI have a higher risk of suicide. You may even want to give up. If you're thinking of harming yourself, call or text 988. You will be connected to trained crisis counselors at the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. An online chat option is also available at [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org). Lifeline is free and available 24/7.

## To learn more

To learn more about depression and other SCI issues, go to:

- [National Institutes of Mental Health at www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)
- [United Spinal Association at www.spinalcord.org](http://www.spinalcord.org)
- [Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation at www.christopherreeve.org](http://www.christopherreeve.org)
- [Paralyzed Veterans of America at www.pva.org](http://www.pva.org)
- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

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