

Medically Reviewed

Depression Definition and DSM-5 Diagnostic Criteria

Depression, otherwise known as major depressive disorder or clinical depression, is a common and serious mood disorder

Updated Aug 26, 2022 By: Jessica Truschel Medical Reviewer: Farah Fazel, Psy.D.

What is Depression?

Depression, otherwise known as major depressive disorder or clinical depression, is a common and serious mood disorder. Those who suffer from depression experience persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness and lose interest in activities they once enjoyed. Aside from the emotional problems caused by depression, individuals can also present with a physical symptom such as chronic pain or digestive issues. To be diagnosed with depression, symptoms must be present for at least two weeks.

The DSM-5 outlines the following criterion to make a diagnosis of [depression](#). The individual must be experiencing five or more symptoms during the same 2-week period and at least one of the symptoms should be either (1) depressed mood or (2) loss of interest or pleasure.

1. Depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day.
2. Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day.
3. Significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain, or decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day.
4. A slowing down of thought and a reduction of physical movement (observable by others, not merely subjective feelings of restlessness or being slowed down).
5. Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day.
6. Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt nearly every day.
7. Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, nearly every day.
8. Recurrent thoughts of death, recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide.

To receive a diagnosis of depression, these symptoms must cause the individual clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. The symptoms must also not be a result of [substance abuse](#) or another medical condition.

- Major depressive disorder is associated with high mortality, much of which is accounted for by suicide. As a result, if you think someone you care about may be suffering from depression it is important to know the warning signs of suicide and to take suicidal statements extremely seriously. An active statement by someone with suicidal ideation might be something like, "I'm going to kill myself," but other passive statements such as, "I wish I could just go to sleep and never wake up," are equally worrying. If someone with depression exhibits these verbal markers, encourage them to consult a mental health professional immediately.
- Depressed individuals also present with irritability, brooding, and obsessive rumination, and report anxiety, phobias, excessive worry over physical health, and complain of pain.

The latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the DSM-5, added two specifiers to further classify diagnoses:

- With Mixed Features – This specifier allows for the presence of manic symptoms as part of the depression diagnosis in patients who do not meet the full criteria for a manic episode.
- With Anxious Distress – The presence of anxiety in patients may affect prognosis, treatment options, and the patient's response to them. Clinicians will need to assess whether or not the individual experiencing depression also presents with anxious distress.

What is the difference between depression and sadness? Given that the primary symptom associated with depression is sadness it can be hard to know how to make a distinction between the two psychological states.


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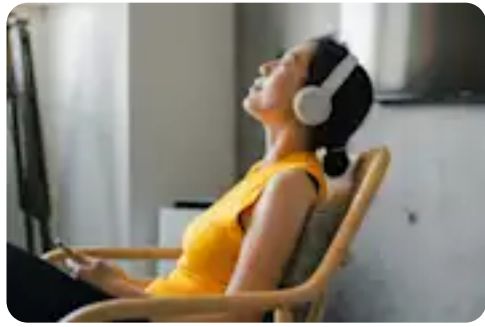
But depression is more than just sadness, and not simply by a measure of degree. The difference doesn't lie in the extent to which a person feels down, but rather in a combination of factors relating to the duration of these negative feelings, other symptoms, bodily impact, and the effect upon the individual's ability to function in daily life.

Sadness is a normal emotion that everyone will experience at some point in his or her life. Be it the loss of a job, the end of a relationship, or the death of a loved one, sadness is usually caused by a specific situation, person, or event. When it comes to depression, however, no such trigger is needed. A person suffering from depression feels sad or hopeless about everything. This person may have every reason in the world to be happy and yet they lose the ability to experience joy or pleasure.

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With sadness, you might feel down in the dumps for a day or two, but you're still able to enjoy simple things like your favorite TV show, food, or spending time with friends. This isn't the case when someone is dealing with depression. Even activities that they once enjoyed are no longer interesting or pleasurable.

What's more, when you experience sadness triggered by a certain something you're still able to sleep as you usually would, remain motivated to do things, and maintain your desire to eat. Depression, on the other hand, is associated with serious disruption of normal eating and sleeping patterns, as well as not wanting to get out of bed all day.

In sadness, you might feel regret or remorse for something you said or did, but you won't experience any permanent sense of worthlessness or guilt as you might with depression. One of the diagnostic features of depression is this kind of self-diminishing, negative thought patterns.

Finally, self-harm and suicidal inclinations don't arise from non-depressive sadness. Those struggling with severe depression may have thoughts of self-harm, death, or suicide, or have a suicide plan.

If you're feeling suicidal or just need to talk, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline for free at 1-800-273-8255. *Or, simply call or text 988 to reach the crisis lifeline.*

Although there is a clear distinction to be made between depression and sadness, it is possible for [major depressive disorder](#) to occur in addition to sadness resulting from a significant loss, such as bereavement, financial ruin, or a serious medical illness. The decision as to whether a diagnosis of depression should be made will depend on the judgment of the clinician treating the individual.

If you think you or someone you care about may be suffering from depression, we encourage you to seek help from a mental health professional. If you lack access to mental healthcare, you can find resources in our [Affordable Therapy](#) article.

The following online directories can be consulted to find a therapist in your area:

- Psychology Today: <https://therapists.psychologytoday.com/rms>
- GoodTherapy.org: <http://www.goodtherapy.org/find-therapist.html>

If you're thinking about suicide, are worried about someone else, or just need emotional support, the emergency Lifeline network is available 24/7. You can call 1-800-273-8255 or go to their website for a [live chat](#).

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