

## OCTOBER: DEPRESSION & MENTAL HEALTH MONTH

Whether we have experienced mental illness (such as depression) or know someone who has or had such a problem, we need to care about the issue of mental health. After all, we all have “mental health”. We may not think much about our mental health or even use that phrase, but it’s a common element in the lives of every one of us. Some people define it as a “state of mind”, while others view it as “being content with life” or “feeling good about yourself”.

Mental health is perhaps best explained as how well we cope with daily life and the challenges it brings. When our mental health is good, we can deal better with what comes our way – at home, at work, in life. When our mental health is poor, it can be difficult to function in our daily lives. It is a fluid, changeable state – like our physical health – with disability and untreated illness at one end, and recovery or complete wellness at the other end. Most of us live and move within the middle range of the spectrum.

**Most of us take our mental health for granted.** After all, since it’s such a basic, unseen part of who we are, it doesn’t seem to require a lot of thought compared to everything else going on in our lives or the world. But the reality is that mental health is a major factor in all aspects of our lives. We see it in our relationships, in our performance at work or school, and in health issues. With our fast paced, “24/7” culture, we face more stress from our daily lives than ever before. Many of us work extended hours or multiple jobs, and take less vacation. Many of us are chronically overworked, with the line between the office or factory and our homes blurred, so that home is no longer a place of rest or refuge. Sleep and exercise feel like luxuries. We often eat poorly. We are more disconnected from family, friends and neighbors, less engaged in our communities. Trust in one another has steadily declined in our world.

Mental disorders comprise a long list of conditions, including attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety disorders, autism, bipolar personality, codependency, dementia, depression, eating disorders, learning disabilities, obsessive / compulsive behaviors, panic disorder, paranoia, phobias, post-traumatic stress, schizophrenia, self-injury, substance abuses, suicide and more. Just one of these illnesses, depression, affects more than 19 million Americans each year. The stigma of mental illness prevents many people from discussing their symptoms or seeking treatment; yet, clinical depression is very treatable, with **more than 80% of those who seek treatment showing improvement**, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. The most common treatments are

antidepressant medications, psychotherapy or a combination of the two: the choice depends on the problem, severity and history of illness. As with many conditions, early diagnosis and treatment is more effective and helps lessen the likely-hood of recurrence.

**Symptoms** of clinical depression include

- Persistent sad, anxious or “empty” mood
- Sleep disturbances including sleeping too much or too little
- Appetite disturbances with weight loss or gain
- Loss of pleasure or interest in activities once enjoyed, including sex
- Restlessness and irritability
- Difficulty concentrating, making decisions or memory
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Feelings of guilt, hopelessness, worthlessness, even thoughts of suicide or death



**Many things can contribute** to depression. For some people, a combination of factors appear to be involved, while for others a single factor can cause the illness:

- Biological: people with depression often have too little or too much of certain brain chemicals call “neurotransmitters”
- Cognitive: people with negative thinking patterns and low self-esteem are more likely to be depressed
- Gender: women experience depression at a rate nearly twice that of men (possibly related to hormone changes women go through with menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause)
- Co-occurrence: depression is more likely to occur along with certain other illnesses, such as heart disease, cancer, Parkinson’s, diabetes or Alzheimer’s
- Medications: side effects of some meds can bring on depression
- Genetic: a family history of depression increases the risk for developing the illness
- Situational: difficult life event, including divorce, financial problems or death of a loved one can contribute to depression.

Remember, clinical depression and other mental illnesses are never “normal” responses: they are serious conditions that should be treated at any age. For more information, contact your healthcare provider or go to:

- <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs>
- <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/>
- <http://www.psych.org> (American Psychiatric Assoc.)
- <http://www.mentalhealthamerical.net>
- <http://www.depressionscreening.org/screeningtest/>