

# Five Steps You Can Take to Beat the Blues

Like a dark cloud that obscures the sun, depression can cover over our feelings of joy and happiness. Just as the appearance of a cloud can be brief and fleeting or dense and long-lasting, feelings of depression range from a floating day or two of the "blues" or the "blahs" to months, or even years, of incapacitating unhappiness.

While everyone feels depression in their own unique way, there are certain symptoms which are almost always found to be present. Restlessness, loss of concentration, insomnia, change in eating patterns, unexplained fatigue, vague aches and pains, instability and, above all, a sense of sadness and hopelessness should make suspect that depression is the culprit.

It is normal to experience some depression following a loss or after a severe blow to our self-esteem. However, sometimes, this temporary normal state of sadness deepens and begins to affect our happiness and functioning. It is during these times that it is important to take steps to cut depression down to its proper size.

Depression is so frequent that it is often referred to as the 'common cold' of emotional disorders. It has no respect of class, race, age or sex. Paupers and princes alike have endured the suffering that depression can bring. Abraham Lincoln, Queen Victoria, William Styron and Buzz Aldrin are among millions of others around the world that have experienced painful bouts of depression. It has been reliably estimated that at any one time approximately 14 million Americans are seriously depressed, and a far greater number of people experience a milder form of depression.

Because depression is so prevalent and so emotionally and financially draining, scientists from many disciplines are rapidly zeroing in on its causes and cures and so there are many current theories and treatments available.

Some psychologists and psychiatrists feel that serious depression sets in after a long period at unresolved stress in some manner, our stress reserves become exhausted. Depression, therefore, can be *seen* as a form "depletion." When this occurs, certain biochemical changes may occur in our brain and this temporary chemical imbalance can cause the myriad of depressive symptoms. Some people, because of their genetic make-up, are more susceptible to depression than others who might be

biologically programmed to respond to stress in different fashion.

Other psychologists and psychiatrists feel that the source of depression can be found in angry feelings that are not expressed and are then turned "inward." Still other scientists are convinced that depression is the result of patterns of faulty thinking in which a person consistently views the world

through "black-tinted" glasses and sees every situation as the beginning of a negative event.

Most recently, many psychologists have convincing evidence, that depression often results from a state of "learned helplessness". When a person feels there is nothing they can do, they simply "give up" and when they stop resisting, they sink rapidly into a state of depression.

From my own clinical work experience with many patients, I am convinced that all these theories are really pieces of the same "jigsaw puzzle" of depression.

The good news is that with competent treatment almost everyone who is depressed can be helped. The bad news is that many people still view depression as some sort of character flaw or as a sign of weakness.

If your depression is severe or long-lasting, you should certainly consider professional help. With or without professional help, however, here are several psychological "first aid" tips that can help you lift the clouds of depression.

## 1) SPOT CHECK YOUR THINKING:

Many research studies indicate that many depressed people constantly make errors in their thinking. They have learned to see everything around them as being a result of their faults or lack of ability. They often indulge in a form of erroneous thinking that is called "over-generalization." For example, one depressed patient of mine was an extremely gifted legal stenographer. Her two employers valued her work and her accuracy. One day, in a marathon rush to type a lengthy brief, she made two typographical errors which her employer asked her to correct. She appeared at my office the next day depressed and tearful. When asked what was troubling her, she told me that she was "a failure" as a stenographer. When she was able to correct her thinking so that it was more realistic, she accepted the fact that everyone makes an error or two. Are you thinking realistically about events in your life?

## 2) GET COMFORTABLE WITH YOUR ANGER:

Anger is a part of life and a natural reaction to frustration. Handling anger properly is a great skill. Exploding with anger rarely helps. "Stuffing" anger, however, often can result in an implosion THAT CAUSES DEPRESSION





**IN DEALING** with depression, your goal is to identify the source of your anger and to learn not to feel guilty about your feelings. You are responsible not for what you feel but for what you do with your feelings. You must learn to express your anger in an appropriate manner that can help undue the source of your frustrations.

### 3) TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY:

The ancient Greeks know that it was impossible to have a "sound mind" unless you also had a "sound body".

Too often in our rush to miracle drugs, and quick fixes, we forget this ancient wisdom. Many people who are depressed can improve their mental outlook by simply taking better care of their bodies. Lack of rest and sleep can result in a sense of fatigue which often deepens into depression. Not exercising our bodies makes us feel sluggish and dull. Alcohol which is often used by people to lift their spirits, plays a cruel trick by actually producing a state of depression. Indeed, depression and alcoholism are twin sisters of despair. Often, when a heavy drinker stops drinking, they are surprised how much their mood improves after a period of several weeks.

### 4) ARE YOU GETTING ANY "PAY-OFF" FROM YOUR DEPRESSION:

Sometimes, a person who is depressed has learned (often unconsciously) that being the unhappy victim and staying sad has its special rewards.

One college student that I knew, learned that each time she would begin to cry to her boyfriend about her dorm conditions and her roommate, he would try to cheer her up by taking her to a movie or to dinner. Without realizing it, rewarding her behavior in this manner, only served to increase her depressive behavior. After a while, the boyfriend became disgusted with her constant unhappiness and found himself another girlfriend who had a more balanced view of life.

When someone is sad or complains, most friends and close associates are initially sympathetic. After awhile, however, people withdraw their support and the depressed

person is more lonely than ever. Is anyone that you know "rewarding" your sad mood by giving you some special privilege or attention? **Think hard!**

### 5) DO! DO! DO!

Considerable recent research points to the fact that both people and animals can learn to be helpless.

In one classic experiment, dogs in a laboratory learned they could not escape a harmless by slightly painful electric shock. When these dogs were later placed in a situation where they could, in fact, escape the shock- they did nothing. They learned to be helpless.

Many people, after a series of frustrating failures or disappointments, simply give-up and give-in. Like the dogs in the laboratory, they have learned to be helpless and they generalize their helplessness and pessimism to new situations which, in reality, they could do something about. In the last analysis, depression is a disease of hope. When you are sad or down, our greatest enemy is inactivity and passivity. To combat this tendency, it is important to stay active and involved. If one solution doesn't seem to work, try another. If a second doesn't work- try a third. Start becoming involved in new and constructive activities. learn a new skill, play some tennis, volunteer at a shelter for the homeless. Return to some of the healthy activities that used to bring you pleasure.

If, after a period of self-help you find that you are still down, do yourself a favor and get the help of a qualified professional person who can be your ally in your battle against the "blues"

**YOU CAN WIN!!!**

## About Dr. Sugarman

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