

Question: I've been feeling very low and hopeless for a few months and can't seem to turn my mood around. My husband thinks I may be depressed, but I've always thought that was just something people said when they felt sad. Could I actually be depressed?

Depression is a serious condition that can impact every area of your life. It can affect your social life, interest in things you once found enjoyable, your family relationships, your career, and your sense of self-worth and purpose. According to the National Mental Health Association, approximately 12 million women in the United States experience clinical depression each year. And, as many as one out of every four women is likely to experience an episode of major depression at some point in her life.

But the good news is that depression is treatable, and the more you understand about depression, the more equipped you will be to tackle the condition head on.

Depression is a serious and pervasive mood disorder. It causes feelings of sadness, hopelessness, helplessness and worthlessness. Depression can be mild to moderate with symptoms of apathy, little appetite, difficulty sleeping, low self-esteem and low-grade fatigue. Or, it can be major depression with debilitating symptoms of depressed mood most of the day, diminished interest in daily activities, weight loss or gain, insomnia or hypersomnia (oversleeping), fatigue, diminished sex drive, feelings of guilt almost daily, and recurring thoughts of death or suicide.

Experts believe that the increased chance of depression in women may be related to changes in hormone levels that occur throughout a woman's life. These changes are evident during puberty, pregnancy and menopause, as well as after giving birth, having a hysterectomy, or experiencing a miscarriage. In addition, the hormone fluctuations that occur with each month's menstrual cycle probably contribute to premenstrual syndrome (PMS) and premenstrual dysphoric disorder, or PMDD -- a severe syndrome marked especially by depression, anxiety, cyclical mood shifts and lethargy. Before adolescence, the rate of depression is about the same in girls and boys. However, with the onset of puberty, a girl's risk of developing depression increases dramatically to twice that of boys.

Many women face additional stresses of work and home responsibilities, caring for children and aging parents, abuse, poverty, and relationship strains. It remains unclear why some women faced with enormous challenges develop depression, while others with similar challenges do not.

Depression can also coexist with other serious medical illnesses, such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, thyroid problems and multiple sclerosis, and may even make symptoms of the illness worse. Studies have shown that both women and men who have depression in addition to a serious medical illness tend to have more severe symptoms of both illnesses. They also have more difficulty adapting to their medical condition, and more medical costs than those who do not have coexisting depression. Research has shown that treating the depression, along with the coexisting illness, will help ease both conditions.

And while depression due to life events is common and sometimes diminishes with time, if your feelings of depression don't improve after talking with close friends or significant people in your life, you may want to consider seeking treatment.

If you are hesitant to seek treatment on your own, perhaps asking your husband or someone else close to you to accompany you to the appointment may help you take that first step. Even with treatment, depression will take some time to resolve. If an anti-depressive medication is prescribed, keep in mind that it takes several weeks for many of them to reach a therapeutic level and for you to be feeling better. Communicate your feelings with individuals in your life who matter to you and tell them what they can do to be supportive of you in this process.

COMCARE of Sedgwick County is a licensed Community Mental Health Center. You may contact COMCARE at 316-660-7540 and talk with a qualified professional about a variety of methods used to treat depression, including medications such as antidepressants and psychotherapy. You and your mental health care provider will determine the best course of treatment for you.

Marilyn Cook, LCSW, is currently the Executive Director of COMCARE of Sedgwick County. She serves as the Chair of The Mental Health Consortium Board in Topeka and was the Governor-appointed member to the 3-R Committee (Recodification, Rehabilitation and Re-Entry) representing the mental health system in Kansas. She is a member of The Association of Community Mental Health Centers of Kansas's Public Policy Committee. Locally, Ms Cook serves on the Sedgwick County Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, a mental health representative to Team Justice, Sedgwick County's Juvenile Corrections Advisory Board, Sedgwick County's Child Advocacy Center Work Group and has also recently completed a year-long participation in the Kansas Public Health Leadership Institute as a Cycle III Scholar.