Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Understanding and treating depression

A layoff, a death in the family, a failed exam: everyone experiences setbacks that leave them feeling down, empty or even grief-stricken. They're natural responses to life's more challenging situations. But for the estimated American suffering from depression, the negative emotions and thought patterns become a way of life rather than a reaction. This experience of depression can last weeks, months, or longer, and affects all aspects of their life.

What causes depression?

While not yet completely understood, the causes for depression stem from a combination of genetic/ biological, environmental and psychological factors.

Studies show that heredity can play a role: those with family members, who have battled depression, are more likely to experience it themselves. Some people may develop depression because of a biochemical imbalance in the brain or hormonal changes. Negative life situations—including loss of a loved one, unemployment, financial difficulties etc.—can also trigger an episode of depression.

What are the signs of depression?

Symptoms of clinical depression can include:

- Constant feelings of sadness, irritability, or tension
- Decreased interest or pleasure in usual activities or hobbies
- Loss of energy, feeling tired despite lack of activity
- A change in appetite, with significant weight loss or weight gain
- A change in sleeping patterns, such as insomnia, waking early or sleeping too much
- Restlessness or feeling "slowed down"
- Decreased ability to make decisions or concentrate
- Feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, or guilt; and/or
- Thoughts of suicide or death

If you suspect you are suffering from depression, consult with a health professional immediately. If you believe a relative or friend is battling depression, let him or her know why you're concerned. As many sufferers try to deny they're depressed, it's vital to remain patient but gently voice your concern.

No one needs to face depression on his or her own. With professional support, a range of effective treatment options and resources are available.

Approaches to treating depression

Depending on a person's symptoms and needs, depression can frequently be effectively treated with medication, counselling and most often a combination of the two.

Exercise. For mild cases of depression, regular exercise can have a significant, positive impact on your moods. Regular trips to the gym, running, cycling, skiing or even rigorous walking can help to lift your spirits.

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Medication. Anti-depressant medication works to help restore the chemical imbalance experienced by people suffering from depression, and can play a key role in the treatment of the disease. A medical professional can provide more information on anti-depressant medications.

Counseling. Meeting with a professional counselor can be very beneficial for a person experiencing depression. Counseling provides an opportunity to talk openly and confidentially about sad feelings and negative thoughts, and help provide strategies for coping with these. Discussing and gaining insight into the circumstances that may have triggered the episode of depression can also be helpful.

Other things that may help. When spirits are low, it is hard to muster the energy required to take care of ourselves, but it is really important to do a few small things each day to move in the direction of recovery:

- Avoid using drugs and alcohol which can worsen the symptoms.
- Do your best to eat healthy.
- Get out for a walk.
- Stay connected with friends and family, and accept their offers to participate in activities.
- Understand that depression is not your fault.
- Talk to people who have gone through and recovered from depression.
- Postpone any big life decisions such as changes in housing, job or relationships, as your judgment may be compromised by depression.
- Try not to expect the recovery process to occur rapidly. Recovery is a slow, "little by little" process.

If you or a family member are experiencing any signs of depression or are concerned about someone who is, contact a professional for support.