

Assisting the Depressed Lawyer

By Ann D. Foster

Find Out More About Depression

What is depression?

Depression is more than the blues or the blahs; it is more than the normal, everyday ups and downs. When that “down” mood, along with other symptoms, lasts for more than a couple of weeks, the condition may be clinical depression. Clinical depression is a serious health problem that affects the total person. In addition to feelings, it can change behavior, physical health, appearance, professional performance, social activity, and the ability to handle everyday decisions and pressures.

What causes clinical depression?

We do not know all the causes of depression but there seem to be biological and emotional factors that may increase the likelihood that an individual will develop a depressive disorder. Research over the past decade strongly suggests a genetic link to depressive disorders; depression can run in families. Difficult life experiences and certain personal patterns such as difficulty handling stress, low self-esteem, or extreme pessimism about the future can increase the chances of becoming depressed.

How common is it?

Clinical depression is a lot more common than most people think. It will affect more than 19 million Americans this year. Early 1990s research indicated that lawyers might be more vulnerable to depression than other professionals. Almost half of all callers to the Texas Lawyers’ Assistance Program hotline talk about symptoms that sound like depression.

Is it serious?

Depression can be very serious. Suicide is often linked to depression. Male lawyers in the United States are two times more likely to commit suicide than men in the general population.

Are all depressive disorders alike?

There are various forms or types of depression. Some people experience only one episode of depression in their whole life, but many have several recurrences. Some depressive episodes begin suddenly for no apparent reason, while others can be associated with a life situation or stress. Sometimes people who are depressed cannot perform even the simplest daily activities like getting out of bed or getting dressed. Others go through the motions but it is clear that they are not acting or thinking as usual. Some people suffer from bipolar disorder in which their moods cycle between two extremes — from the depth of desperation to frenzied talking or activity or grandiose ideas about their own competence.

Can it be treated?

Yes, depression is treatable. Between 80 and 90 percent of people with depression can be helped. There are a variety of antidepressant medications and psychotherapies that can be used to treat depressive disorders. Some people with milder forms may do well with psychotherapy alone. People with moderate to severe depression most often benefit from antidepressants. Most do best with combined treatment: medication to gain relatively quick symptom relief and psychotherapy to learn more effective ways to deal with life’s problems, including depression.

The most important step toward overcoming depression — and sometimes the most difficult — is asking for help.

Why don’t people get the help they need?

Often people don’t know they are depressed so they don’t ask for or get the right help. Most people fail to recognize the symptoms of depression in themselves or in other people. Also, depression can sap energy and self-esteem and thereby interfere with a person’s ability or wish to get help.

Be Able To Tell Fact From Fiction

Myths about depression often separate people from the effective treatments now available. Friends and colleagues need to know the facts. Some of the most common myths are these:

Myth: He's such a great lawyer, he just can't be depressed!

Fact: Lawyers get depression too. Intelligence, success, or position in the community are not barriers to depression. Depression can affect people of any age, gender, race/ethnicity, or economic group.

Myth: Lawyers who claim to be depressed are whiners and weak and just need to pull themselves together. There's nothing that we can do to help.

Fact: Depression is not a weakness but a serious health disorder. People who are depressed need professional treatment. A trained therapist or counselor can help them learn more positive ways to think about themselves, change behaviors, cope with stress and problems, or handle relationships. A physician can prescribe medications to help relieve the symptoms of depression. For most, a combination of psychotherapy and medication is beneficial.

Myth: Talking about depression only makes it worse.

Fact: Talking about things may help a friend or colleague recognize the need for professional help. By showing friendship and caring concern and by giving uncritical support, you can encourage your friend or colleague to talk to another trusted adult, TLAP, or mental health professional about getting treatment.

Know the Symptoms

The first step toward defeating depression is to define it. People who are depressed often have a hard time thinking clearly or recognizing their own symptoms. They may need your help.

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Check the following boxes if you notice a friend or colleague with any of these symptoms persisting longer than two weeks:

Do they express feelings of:

- sadness or emptiness?
- hopelessness, pessimism, or guilt?
- helplessness or worthlessness?

Do they seem:

- unable to make decisions?
- unable to concentrate and remember?
- to have lost interest or pleasure in ordinary activities like sports, hobbies, or social activities?
- to have more problems at work and at home?

Do they complain of:

- loss of energy and drive — so they seem “slowed down?”
- trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or getting up?
- appetite problems: are they losing or gaining weight?
- headaches, stomach aches, or back aches?
- chronic aches and pains in joints and muscles?

Has their behavior changed suddenly so that:

- they are restless and more irritable?
- they want to be alone most of the time?
- they've started missing work, deadlines, appointments, or dropped hobbies or activities?
- you think they may be drinking heavily or taking drugs?

Have they talked about:

- death?
- suicide — or have they attempted suicide?

How To Help

If you checked several of the boxes above, your friend or colleague may need help. The most important thing you can do for someone who is depressed is to get him or her to a professional for an appropriate diagnosis and treatment. Don't assume that someone else is taking care of the problem. Negative thinking, inappropriate behavior, or physical changes need to be addressed as quickly as possible. Your help may include the following:

- Give suggestions of names and phone numbers of reputable therapists or psychiatrists.
- Encourage or help the individual to make an appointment with a professional and accompany the individual to the doctor.

- Encourage the individual to stay with treatment until symptoms begin to abate.
- Encourage continued communication with doctor about different treatment options if no improvement occurs.
- Offer emotional support, understanding, patience, friendship, and encouragement.
- Engage in conversation and fellowship. Listen.
- Refrain from disparaging feelings; point out realities and offer hope.
- Take remarks about suicide seriously, do not ignore them and don't agree to keep them confidential. Report them to the individual's therapist or doctor if your friend or colleague is reluctant to discuss the issue with you or his or her doctor.
- Invite the individual for walks, outings, to the movies, and other activities. Be gently insistent if your invitation is refused.
- Encourage participation in some activity that once gave pleasure — hobbies, sports, religious, or cultural activities.
- Don't push the depressed person to undertake too much too soon; too many demands may increase feelings of failure.
- Eventually with treatment, most people get better. Keep that in mind and keep reassuring the depressed person that with time and help, he or she will feel better.

Where To Get Help

The Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program (TLAP) can help you in a variety of ways by providing crisis counseling, education and training resources, assistance with identifying reputable mental health professionals and treatment options in your community, strategies and coaching for conversations with your friends or colleague, and information about suicide prevention resources. In certain circumstances, TLAP may be able to directly assist in your conversations with your colleagues or friends.

If you don't access TLAP, please consider contacting other resources who can help prepare you with names, phone numbers, and other information about where to send your friend or colleague for assessment and treatment. These resources may include family doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, licensed professional counselors, community mental health organizations, hospital psychiatric departments and outpatient clinics, university or medical school affiliated programs, state hospital outpatient clinics, family service and social agencies, clergy, private clinics, employee assistance programs, and local medical or psychiatric societies.

Act Now


Early and professional treatments for depression can lessen the severity of the illness, reduce the duration of symptoms, and may also prevent additional bouts of depression.

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The Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program (TLAP)

is a confidential crisis counseling and referral program that helps Texas lawyers, judges, and law students who are challenged by substance use and other mental health disorders, including clinical depression, anxiety, and stress-related concerns. Please call TLAP at (800)343-8527 for more information.



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