

Coping with College Series

College Students and Depression

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We tend to use the term depression very casually when speaking to friends and acquaintances. For instance, when we feel down...blue...glum... we often say we are feeling depressed. We may even hear someone say, "I'm depressed that the Chicago Bears lost again" or "it depresses me that there are so many homeless people all over the world." But, what exactly is depression and how can you tell if you or someone you love is clinically depressed?

Clinical depression is more than just having the "blues" or normal mood swings, and it can strike anytime. The college years are times of transition and growth. It's a time when we try to find a niche and want to gain independence from our family. This makes us susceptible to depression.

Depression refers to marked changes in our mood and ranges from mild feelings of sadness to intense feelings of hopelessness and even suicidal ideation. Sometimes depression is associated with other problems such as anxiety, eating disorders, and alcohol/substance abuse. Depression can happen gradually or it can be triggered by specific events. For instance, some of us may feel depressed when we move away from home to attend college for the first time; when we get a poor grade on a paper or exam; or when a romantic relationship ends. It is natural to feel hurt and sad when we suffer a loss or experience failure, disappointment or rejection. But, sometimes what starts out as a normal reaction turns into clinical depression.

Depression can persist for weeks, months, or years, and can affect every aspect of our daily lives. Depression often makes people tired and irritable. It also elicits feelings of pessimism, negativism, worthlessness and guilt. Other warning signs of depression include: (a) changes in appetite (b) sleeping problems (e.g., insomnia or sleeping too much) (c) loss of concentration and difficulty remembering things (d) loss of motivation or interest in activities that were of interest (e) feeling sad and empty inside (f) worrying (g) withdrawal (h) feelings of hopelessness and helplessness (i) thoughts of death and suicide.

Depressed individuals have been found to have a deficit in neurotransmitters (chemicals in the brain that allow communication among brain cells). This is treatable with anti-depressant medication. An imbalance of the neurotransmitter, serotonin has been found to produce sleep problems, increased anxiety and irritability, and an inadequate amount of the neurotransmitter, norepinephrine produces fatigue and a sad mood.

The presence of one or two of the aforementioned symptoms of depression does not mean you are clinically depressed. Several symptoms must occur together. If you or someone you know is feeling depressed, talk to someone immediately. You can talk to your resident assistant (RA) or other University Housing Services [UHS] staff, a faculty, or staff member. Student Counseling Services is another avenue where students can talk with an individual counselor on staff or gain support from other students in group. Contact SCS at 438-3655 for additional information.