

What is Depression?

“Not being able to control what is happening to you is frustrating. It’s scary. It is exhausting.”

Michelle Wojcik lives with depression. Depression is not just feeling sad about something. It is a serious mood disorder that can affect anyone. Michelle was diagnosed at 12 years old.

“I became very isolative and I wouldn’t want to leave my room. I wouldn’t want to do chores. I didn’t want to communicate with family.”

“It’s not just feeling down for a couple of days, once a month. It’s more of a persistent, two weeks at least, of feeling down consistently and having those symptoms.”

How long symptoms last depends on the type of depression you have. Two of the most common types of depression are Major Depressive Disorder and Persistent Depressive Disorder. To be diagnosed with major depression, you must have episodes of depression that last at least two weeks that interfere with your life. In between episodes, you might not experience any symptoms at all. It’s a diagnosis Jim Hill received after a suicide attempt in 1993.

“I go through periodic depressive episodes. Some are more severe than others. Some are lengthier than others. Some are relatively short. They come when they come, and they leave when they decide to leave.”

The other most common type of depression, persistent depressive disorder, has symptoms that last for at least two years, but they tend to be less severe than the symptoms of major depression. Other types of depression include seasonal affective disorder, which often affects people during winter months when there’s less sunlight, and Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder, which is a severe form of PMS.

“Depending on the type of depression that you have and the symptoms of that depression, you and your doctor will make the decision about the right medication for you.”

The symptoms of depression can include: feelings of sadness, worthlessness and helplessness, loss of interest, very low energy, low motivation, difficulty concentrating, trouble remembering or making decisions, trouble sleeping, and thoughts of death. There may also be physical symptoms.

“It can cause changes in body weight, appetite either increases or decreases. So, it’s not just mood.”

Michelle was in and out of various mental health facilities growing up. Her symptoms got worse and included self-harm where she would cut herself if she felt stressed or sad. Michelle also attempted suicide.

“I felt like I was a burden to other people in my life because of my symptoms and because of just not being able to feel like I could control my own actions.”

So what causes depression? There are things that may make some people more vulnerable than others. The makeup of your brain, or how it happens to be wired, can be a factor. So, can your family history.

“If you have a family member with severe depression, then you’re more likely to have it.”

That was the case for Jim Hill, whose father likely suffered from depression.

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“When my father, who passed away in 2010, had suffered from depression all his life. And at 68, he was still not being treated for it because it was stigmatizing.”

Growing up, Jim says his father’s depression led to many problems at home. He eventually passed away without getting any treatment. Jim’s own depression symptoms started to appear when he was a child.

“This disease followed me every year of my life.”

Other possible causes of depression include big life changes regarding relationships or finances, trauma, and chronic stress, which can cause changes in your brain and body.

“That cortisol, that stress hormone that’s released during and after stress, is elevated chronically in depressed individuals.”

When you are stressed, your brain triggers the body’s built-in alarm system. When the alarm is activated, your body releases a hormone called cortisol that helps your body prepare for stress. Cortisol affects many parts of your body, including your heart rate and blood pressure. During times of high and constant stress, cortisol can impact your brain’s ability to control your mood leading to a risk of depression and anxiety. Both Michelle and Jim sought help and are now receiving treatment to successfully manage their depression.

“Know you’re not alone. I can’t tell you how much I wish I had known that.”

“You can live fulfilling lives when you recognize that you’re a person with a mental health condition and it’s just who you are. It’s part of you were are. It’s not the sum of all you are.”

If you feel that you might be depressed, contact a mental health professional for help.