

Managing Depression: Overcoming Barriers and Getting Help

More than 16 million Americans live with major depression. Recognizing you may need professional help is the first step to living a healthy life.

"I had to allow myself to believe that something other than simply living with this in the condition I was in was going to help me feel better."

Jim Hill was diagnosed with depression after attempting suicide. That was a wake-up call.

"In order for me to get beyond being, being trapped in this disease for the rest of my life with no hope of escape, I knew I had to disassemble and reassemble my entire life and it was extraordinarily painful, but it saved me."

Jim found professional help and, with therapy and medications, he's managing his depression and reclaiming his life. Someone with depression experiences symptoms – both mental and physical – that last for at least two weeks without a break. This is called a depressive episode.

"They often feel sad, they'll isolate, sometimes they'll be irritable. They don't want to be around people. And these things tend to make depression worse."

Isolation is an element of Claudine Jackson's ongoing battle with depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. How she coped with this symptom was by joining a social club for people with mental illness.

"Once I got professional help, I developed into this amazing person that I know that I am, and I learned that I'm not alone."

Claudine's mental illness stems from traumatic abuse she suffered as a child.

"I was the victim at the hands of someone that was very close to me, my father. And when I talked about it to my siblings and my mom, no one believed me."

Trauma is just one of the risk factors that can lead to depression. The way your brain is wired, other medical or mental health conditions, substance abuse and family history may also come into play.

"If you have a family member with severe depression, then you're more likely to have it."

In between depressive episodes, you might not experience any symptoms at all. It's up to you - and those close to you - to pay attention, watching for any changes that might point to the start of a depressive episode. Michelle Wojcik knows how important that support is for spotting symptoms.

"I don't necessarily always recognize them first. Somebody in my life recognizes them first. It becomes like kind of a tag team process where that person will be like 'hey you're starting to isolate.'"

Michelle has been dealing with depression since she was a child. Eventually she found medications that helped her get better. But she still has to pay close attention to the reappearance of any symptoms. Isolation, she says, is a red flag that tells her to call her therapist.

"There always has to be vigilance to make sure that your symptoms are staying in check."

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If depression goes untreated, it can lead to other serious health problems like substance abuse and obesity. In the most severe cases, people may feel their only way to escape the symptoms of depression is suicide.

"It's something that I hid for years and I decided that I needed to get some help because it was making me sicker. So, I didn't talk about it because I thought mental illness was a stigma and I didn't want to be seen as a person who suffers from mental illness."

It's important not to let embarrassment or judgment be a barrier to getting help. Depression is common. Finding a mental health therapist to help you learn how to manage your depression can give you your life back.

"Absolutely you can live fulfilling lives where you recognize that you're a person with a mental health condition."

"To ignore and be in the dark about it, it doesn't have to be that way. Talk about it."

"It's ok to not be ok."

"It's part of who you are. It's not the sum of all who you are."

"It's a part of life."