

What's going on? Am I depressed? ^[1]

(1) Dear Alice,

How can you tell if you are psychologically depressed? How do you ask? What if you are only depressed sometimes? I am a first-year psychology student, I live in college, and I seem to be having plenty of mood swings lately. I used to be very bubbly and enthusiastic and happy and relaxed all the time, but lately, I've just been edgy and sad, and I cry a lot. What's going on? I've been at university now for nine months. I'm only seventeen, and I live away from home (and I'm happy about that). I still have fun sometimes, and I get involved a lot, but then something will happen and I just bomb. I feel helpless and useless and angry because I am unappreciated. It annoys my friends and that makes me feel even worse. What's going on?

(2) Dear Alice,

How do I know if I am depressed and need help? For about a year now, I have been easily irritated, angry, I cry when something sad or happy happens, I have lost seven pounds (last year), sometimes I have a hard time sleeping at night. I go over everything I did wrong in a day, and I have a hard time trying to concentrate on reading. I have wanted to mention this to my doctor, but I am very shy about it. He says I am physically healthy. I have tried exercising, and taking warm baths to help me feel better. What is wrong with me?

Signed,

Helpless

Answer

Dear Reader #1 and Helpless,

The word "depression" seems to be thrown around left and right these days, doesn't it? ("I'm so depressed that the dining hall is out of fries!"). But for those actually experiencing depressed feelings it can be quite a heavy burden to bear, not only for individuals but for society as a whole. In fact, about seven percent of Americans have major depressive disorder (often referred to as "depression"), and it's one of the leading causes of disability worldwide. Of course, there's a difference between feeling occasionally blue and being clinically depressed — nearly everyone

goes through regular ups and downs, especially in a time of stress and transition, such as starting college. While taking some time to find your emotional footing following a stressful life event is perfectly normal, persistent and severe symptoms might warrant a more thorough evaluation. And, because depression is one of several possible reasons you may be feeling down in the dumps, the only way to truly know what's going on is by talking with a health care provider.

After evaluating you for any physical underlying causes of feeling down — through a physical examination and tests — you may be connected with a mental health professional who would then be able to evaluate you for psychological conditions. Knowing the symptoms of major depressive disorder may be helpful, but before you jump to any conclusions, it's best to leave the diagnosing to the professionals. To help clarify the idea of going to see a provider, five or more of the following symptoms, persistently lasting at least two weeks may be a sign of depression:

- Depressed mood (or agitation, if you're an adolescent)
- Loss of interest in most activities
- Unintended weight loss or change in appetite
- Insomnia [2] (not sleeping) or hypersomnia [3] (sleeping excessively)
- Psychomotor changes (e.g., inability to sit still or delayed reactions)
- Fatigue
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Difficulty concentrating
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide [4]

Major depressive disorder may not be the only cause of your recent blues. Reader #1, you mention that you're a first-year at college —perhaps your depressed feelings are more a result of the abrupt transition to college [5] rather than a mental illness? Hyperthyroidism or hypothyroidism [6] (both involve the gland that produces several of your body's essential hormones) are also two common physiological reasons for mood changes. Other mental health conditions that have similar symptoms include bipolar disorder, premenstrual dysphoric disorder [7], and substance dependence or withdrawal.

As you mention, Helpless, asking for help can be intimidating, or you may feel embarrassed. For starters, being open about what you're going through by asking this question is a great first step, so kudos to you! When you're ready to take that leap (and many people do take that leap), they may recommend a number of different treatment options depending on your specific needs, including counseling, medications, and self-care (e.g., building a social support network, physical activity, or avoiding drugs and alcohol).

Suffice it to say, feelings of depression can be confusing and frustrating, especially if you're not sure exactly why you're feeling that way. However, if your mood is disrupting your way of life or your interactions with family and friends, seeking support from a mental health professional may pave the way to figuring out what is going on and get you on the road to brighter days ahead.

Alice!

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