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What Factors Contribute to Depression?

Much research has been conducted in an effort to better understand depression; however, scientists still do not know exactly what triggers depression. Instead of one cause triggering this illness, experts believe several factors working together may lead to a person becoming depressed. The three primary factors are **genetic**, **biological**, and **environmental** in nature.

GENETIC FACTORS

Many studies have pointed to the fact that there are family links to depression. For example, if one identical twin suffers from depression or bipolar disorder, the other twin has a 70 percent chance of also having the illness (“Causes of Depression,” 2006). Even when identical twins are raised apart from each other, they will both become depressed 67% of the time (“Causes: Biology,” 2006).

Another recent study demonstrated the genetic loading that often takes place between parent and child. Depression in a parent more than doubled the risk for anxiety disorders, depression and addictions in children. Nearly three times as many children of depressed parents had been treated for emotional problems, and twice as many had taken psychiatric drugs (Weissman, 2006).

The importance of understanding the genetic link to depression is that special care can be taken to be vigilant. A close and ongoing watch by caretakers of children who are more at risk for depression should pick up early signs of problems. Catching depression early can lead to optimal treatment.

BIOLOGICAL FACTORS

Biological causes of depression involve changes in the chemistry of the brain. As mentioned earlier in the “What’s Going On in the Brain” section of this book (page 20), two chemical substances implicated with depression are **serotonin** and **norepinephrine**. Other body chemicals may also be altered in depressed people. One such hormone is **cortisol**. The body produces cortisol in response to stress, anger, or fear. Normally, cortisol in the bloodstream peaks in the morning. However, with depressed people, cortisol does not level off or decrease during the afternoon and evening.

Researchers do not know if these chemical imbalances cause the disease or if depression causes an increase to the imbalances. What is known is that cortisol levels will increase in those who live with long-term stress.

One encouraging study of late demonstrated how medical interventions can positively impact families. A study by Weissman et al. (2006) of 151 depressed mothers and their children (ages 7-17) shows that treating a mother can both prevent and relieve depression in her child. One third of the mothers recovered after three months of treatment and nearly half improved substantially.

Many of the children also had psychiatric symptoms, and more than a third had a psychiatric disorder. When mothers improved, so did their children. Symptoms of depression, anxiety, and conduct disorder decreased by as much as 35%. Among children who had a psychiatric diagnosis, 33% recovered if their mothers did (Weissman, 2006).

What Concerned Adults Can Do to Help

Grown-ups play a huge part in helping youth with depression. Adults have the means to seek out much needed help. Adults also can set an environment that is conducive for recovery from this serious illness. Below are some practical tips to consider.

ACCEPT

Accept that your child or teen has an illness that is beyond his or her control. He or she does not like being depressed and may be doing as well as is possible at this time.

LISTEN

Take time to listen to and fully understand your child's or teen's feelings. When someone feels understood, they become less tense. This will help promote healing in the relationship.

ALLY

Be your child's greatest ally. Stick with him or her through the hard times. Foster hope that things will get better, and love your child unconditionally. This is hard work because youth with depression are often not pleasant to be around.

PUNT

Take the pressure off to excel academically or to perform at an excellent level in various activities. Grades typically drop when a person is depressed. Don't worry! As the depression subsides, the grades should improve to their normal standards. The same is true in sports and arts-related activities. The most important task now is to work through the depression.

SEEK

Seek out professional help. Depression is serious and not a do-it-on-your-own proposition. Various physicians, in particular **child psychiatrists** and **neurologists**, can assess any needs regarding medications. Working in tandem with a physician, a child psychotherapist or psychologist can provide an understanding ear and coping strategies.

The Signs of Depression for Teens Ages 13-18

Place a check by any of the following that describe you.

- _____ My school performance is not up to par.
- _____ I am missing too many days of school.
- _____ I am withdrawing from friends.
- _____ I refrain from doing enjoyable activities.
- _____ I often feel hopeless or sad.
- _____ I have trouble making decisions.
- _____ I forget things too often.
- _____ I have trouble concentrating and getting things done.
- _____ I have negative thoughts about myself.
- _____ I often feel guilty.
- _____ I overreact toward others.
- _____ I regularly complain of not feeling well (headaches, etc.)
- _____ I tend to feel angry and go into rages.
- _____ I have little energy much of the time.
- _____ I neglect to take care of myself (personal hygiene, eating right, exercise, etc.).
- _____ I am not keeping up with my school and home responsibilities.
- _____ I drink alcohol and/or take other drugs.
- _____ I have thoughts of wanting to hurt myself or of dying.
- _____ I am cutting or injuring myself in other ways.

Everyone has depressed feelings from time to time. There is, however, a huge difference between depressed feelings and depression. True depression involves long-lasting periods of down feelings. These unhappy periods of time get in the way of normal living. Keep in mind that these signs of depression are only a big problem if they last for weeks or months.

If you are struggling with any one or a combination of these signs of depression, please ask for and get the help you deserve. There are adults that can be trusted. You may want to talk to a teacher, coach, counselor, or family member for starters. Once you've "broken the ice" by telling someone you trust about the things you are experiencing, professional help can be arranged. Trained mental health counselors and doctors can help you to feel and function better. **Depression is not something to take lightly.** Talk to someone you trust and get help. The people you know and trust make up your own personal support system. These are people who will love you no matter what and will help you in any way possible.

List Your Personal Support System

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Strategy 2

TV – The Brain Channels

Think of your brain as a TV with three channels. This is definitely B.C.—before cablevision. The three channels are as follows:



Channel One – The Stormy Mind

The “stormy mind” is when you let things bother you, and you don’t feel good about yourself. This is when your mind is like a dark, cloudy day. You can’t think clearly. You get upset and stay upset. You let things ruin your day. You get stuck on bad thoughts.

Channel Two – The Calm Mind

The calm mind is when you don’t let things bother you (at least not for long), and you feel good about yourself. You think calmly and clearly as if your brain were clear like a spring-fed lake. Even though life doesn’t always happen the way you would like, you still handle what comes your way. Therefore, you feel good about yourself. You refuse to let things ruin your day, and you have peace inside. You feel in control of your feelings because you have good thoughts.



Channel Three – The Bright Mind

This is when your brain is full of good ideas. You can solve problems, not only math problems but even personal problems. Your thoughts are smart and practical. You are able to figure things out in a good way.



The Channel Changer

If you were watching a TV show that you didn’t like, what would you do? Naturally, you would change the channel with a remote control. In the same way, you can change your thoughts anytime you wish. You can change to channel two or three in your brain. **Remember, you control the thoughts in your brain. Change the channel anytime you are stuck in your “stormy mind.”**