

A Health Campaign of Uniformed Services University, [www.usuhs.edu](http://www.usuhs.edu), and the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress, Bethesda, Maryland, [www.CSTSonline.org](http://www.CSTSonline.org)

## WHAT MILITARY FAMILIES SHOULD KNOW ABOUT DEPRESSION

Service members and their families experience unique emotional challenges. Deployment and redeployment, single parenting, and long absences of loved ones are stressful aspects of military life. At times, these events can lead to sadness, feelings of hopelessness, and withdrawal from friends, families, and colleagues. Depression can be a part of chronic fatigue or unexplained aches and pains. Parenting can feel more a burden than a joy. We may feel irritable and even neglectful of our children's needs. When these feelings and behaviors appear, depression may be present. Seeking care for depression, for ourselves or loved ones, takes energy and courage.

The earlier depression is detected and treated, the less likely it is to develop into a more serious problem that can impact one's job, career, health and relationships. Depression is not uncommon during or after the holiday season. Preparing for the holidays, the increased

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expectations of family and friends, the sadness of not having a loved one present, or having to say good-bye after a holiday reunion, can contribute to depression.

Depression is one of the most common and treatable mental disorders. Delay in identifying depression often leads to

needless suffering for the depressed individual and his or her family.

This *Courage to Care* fact sheet provides information to help you talk more effectively about depression with healthcare providers, family, and friends.

A primary care visit is an opportunity to explore concerns about the mental health of your spouse, yourself, and/or your children. What is depression? How does it appear in adults, adolescents, children, and the elderly? The following information might help you or someone you love identify and seek help for depression.

### What is Depression?

Depression is an illness that involves one's body, mood, and thoughts. It affects the way a person eats and sleeps, the way one feels about oneself, and the way one thinks about things. Depression is not a passing blue mood, nor is it a sign of personal weakness. Depression is a *treatable medical illness* just like diabetes or heart disease. Individuals who are depressed often experience more difficulty in performing their job, caring for their children, and in their personal relationships.

A family history of depression and negative life experiences such as loss, trauma, serious illness, and stress can also contribute to the onset of depression. There are effective treatments today for depression including medications and therapy. Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months, or years. Appropriate treatment, however, can help most people who suffer from depression.

*The majority of people who are treated for depression will improve, even those with serious depression. Unfortunately, one-third of sufferers seek help, as they do not realize depression is a treatable illness.*

### Who Gets Depression?

Depression is one of the most common mental disorders. Women are at a higher risk and experience depression about twice as often as men. Many women are also particularly vulnerable after the birth of a baby. The hormonal and physical changes, as well as the added responsibility of a new life, can be factors that lead to postpartum depression. While the "blues" are common in new mothers and go away, a major depressive episode is not normal and requires active intervention.

Depression in men often shows up in the form of alcohol or drug use and working long hours. Men may act irritable, angry, and discouraged when they are depressed. Men are often less willing than women to seek help. Depression commonly affects people between the ages of 30–44.

These are prime parenting years and prime working years. Parenting is challenging in good health, but can be more so if one is depressed. As a parent, it is important to seek treatment for depression as this condition affects everyone in your family.

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*In any given year, 9.5 percent of the population (about 18.8 million Americans) experience depression. The economic cost for this disorder is high, but the cost in human suffering cannot be estimated.*

### **Signs and Symptoms of Depression**

There are some common signs that might indicate depression, but getting a doctor's opinion is the first step to evaluation. Signs and symptoms include:

#### **Symptoms of Adult Depression**

- Persistent sad or empty mood
- Loss of interest or pleasure in ordinary activities
- Changes in appetite or sleep
- Decreased energy or fatigue
- Inability to concentrate or make decisions
- Feelings of guilt, hopelessness, or worthlessness
- Thoughts of death or suicide

#### **Symptoms of Adolescent Depression**

- Loss of interest in school and regular activities; drop in school performance
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Negative thoughts of self and future
- Difficulty making decisions

#### **Symptoms of Depression in Pre-adolescent Children**

Children with other psychiatric disorders (ADHD, conduct disorder, eating disorders, and anxiety disorders), and those with general medical conditions (diabetes, asthma, cancers, and other chronic illnesses) may be prone to depression. The prevalence may also be higher among children with developmental disorders and intellectual disability.

- Physical symptoms, like chronic headaches or stomachaches that cannot be attributed to a physical illness
- Aggression and excessive crying
- Irritability, withdrawal, isolative behavior, and loss of interest and/or pleasure in previously enjoyed activities
- Sleep disturbance (reduced or increased sleep), changes in appetite (reduced or increased appetite), and reduced energy

#### **Symptoms of Depression in the Elderly**

Depression in older adults can be disabling and contribute to the inability to perform activities of daily living. Depression in the elderly is complex and difficult to diagnose due to other medical illnesses that may be present. Clinicians need to differentiate between depression and problems such as dementia, stroke, and other types of brain injuries and illnesses.

#### **General Health Tips for the Holidays**

The following health tips are important for managing mild depression and for optimizing one's health, especially during the holiday season:

- Manage your diet
- Get adequate rest
- Avoid alcohol
- Participate in regular exercise
- Surround yourself with people who are important to you
- Communicate your feelings to someone you trust
- Join a social support group in your military community or in your local area

*Courage to Care* is a health promotion campaign of Uniformed Services University and its Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS). CSTS is the academic arm and a partnering Center of the Defense Centers of Excellence (DCoE) for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury.



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