

# What causes depression?



## Key points to remember:

- There is no single cause for depression. Rather it's a combination of stress and a person's vulnerability to developing depression
- A predisposition to developing depression may have been inherited.
- Temperament and certain personality traits may increase the risk for developing depression.
- Physical illness and gender have also been identified as possible biological causes of depression

Have you ever wondered what causes clinical depression? Perhaps you have recently been diagnosed with depression, and that's made you question why some people get depressed while others don't.

While we don't know exactly what causes depression, research suggests there is no single cause for depression. In general, depression is caused by a number of factors including stressful life events combined with a vulnerability or predisposition to depression that can result from biological, genetic or psychological factors.

## Stress

Continuing long-term life stresses such as unemployment, living in an abusive or uncaring relationship, social isolation, discrimination, bullying or workplace stress are more likely to cause depression than recent life stresses. However, recent events such as losing your job, relationship breakdowns or divorce, retirement or having a baby, can 'trigger' depression.

It is important to recognise that most people can get stressed and depressed by certain events. The majority of people get over the stress or depression within days or weeks while others do not.

## Genetics

There is strong evidence to suggest that genetic factors may increase a person's risk of developing depression. Depression is thought to be a complex trait, meaning that it is likely to be a combination of genes rather than a single gene that contributes to an increased risk. Research indicates that the genetic risk of developing clinical depression is approximately 40% if a biological parent has been diagnosed with the disorder. Therefore 60% of a person's risk is due to factors within their own individual environment.

Even if you have a genetic risk factor, it is important to note that depression is unlikely to occur without a stressful life events. However the risk of developing depression as a result of such an event is strongly genetically determined.

## Personality

Some people may be more at risk of depression because of their personality. Research indicates that certain personality traits may increase a person's risk in developing depression:

- High levels of anxiety or a tendency to worry a lot
- Self-criticism or low self-esteem

- Perfectionism (whilst it maybe a protective factor against the onset of depression, if depression occurs, it can result in longer episodes)
- Sensitive to criticism
- Self-critical and negative.

## Biological Factors

The stress and worry of coping with a physical illness can lead to a lowered mood which in turn can lead to depression. Chronic pain or a change in your body's functioning and ability to enjoy activities that you usually engage in, can also lead to depression.

Whilst the role of gender in developing depression is not completely understood, studies have shown that women are at a much greater likelihood for developing depression than men. One possible explanation for this difference is that women are more likely than men to internalise stress and hormonal factors which commence during puberty.

## Chemicals in our Brain

Whilst research to improve our understanding of brain chemicals and depression is ongoing, the current consensus indicates that chemical imbalances in the brain may contribute to depression.

Neurotransmitters are chemicals in the brain that carry signals from different parts of the brain. There important neurotransmitters that affects are person's mood include serotonin, noradrenaline and dopamine.

Research indicates that for people who are depressed, these mood regulating neurotransmitters do not function adequately, and this contributes to depression. Restoring the balance of these brain chemicals could help to manage the symptoms associated with depression.

Other factors that have been linked to depression include increased alcohol and other substance use, decreased sleep, lack of exercise and poor diet. Sometimes however there is no clear reason and that's OK, too.

It's important to deal with depression early before it starts having a bigger impact on your life.

Knowing about the causes and risk factors for depression can help you understand why depression occurs and how to deal with it. It's important to emphasise that depression is not a sign of personal weakness, failure, or 'all in the mind'

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