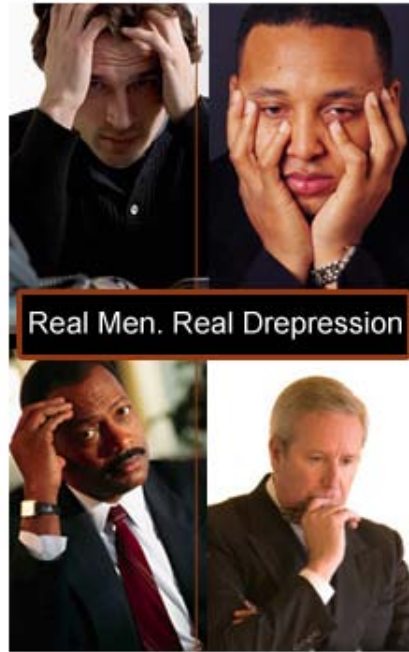


It takes courage to ask for help



These men did.

## **Depression and Men**

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### **Introduction**

Dan\* a 30 year old man sat in his primary care physician's office recounting his experience of the last 2 weeks. He told his doctor of his feeling tired constantly, and having difficulty getting out of bed. He told his doctor: "everything seems like a chore. I have no interest in my obligations, work, my friends, nothing. I find myself distancing myself from my girlfriend and not enjoying time with her as much. At times, my brain seems like in a fog and I feel like I'm sinking into a black hole. I find myself sad and then angry at times for no reason. I am having difficulty concentrating and remembering things. I can't even remember what I had for dinner last night. And that's another thing; I am not eating. I lost 3 pounds in 2 weeks. I feel like I only have energy to watch t.v.. At nights, I can't fall asleep. I fall asleep around 5am and sleep all day, calling out from work and missing breakfast and lunch. I don't go to the usual hang out spots because I worry about people laughing at me or talking about me and judging me. I met a new girl online the other day. We go drinking at the bar every weekend. She also introduced me to pot. It is the only time I feel good about myself and my life. I know my family or girlfriend wouldn't approve of my drinking and doing drugs, but they don't understand me. This girl, she's kind of weird and messed up, but she's a lot of fun and understands me."

\* Note: Dan is a fictitious character.

## What is Depression ?

Depression is a mood disorder. People who suffer from depression experience a number of symptoms including depressed mood, reduced motivation, decreased energy, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, feelings of anger, increase or decrease in sleep, appetite, weight, sex drive, and problems concentration and memory. People who suffer from depression may also experience physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, and muscle tension. These symptoms of depression interfere with people's ability to function at school, work, in relationships, and ability to enjoy life.

Depression affects more than 19 million Americans age 18 and older each year. Depression is a treatable illness that can occur in any one, at any time, and for various reasons regardless of age, gender, race, or income. Depression may be due to genetic, hormonal, or social factors(e.g. stress from work, family responsibility, roles and expectations, sexual abuse, poverty, abuse or neglect).

In men depression may go undetected. Male gender identity is based on dominance, separation, and individuation. Many boys are taught to be dominant and aggressive. The more hurt, vulnerable, or frightened the boy, the more aggressive he may become. Often men are taught to always be strong and persevere through tough times. Men may feel they cannot express emotions such as fear, hurt, or sadness because they have been discouraged from having these emotions. Talking about thoughts and feelings or even crying is not a luxury men allow themselves. Men may find it easier to express anger rather than sadness. Some use alcohol, drugs, food, or sex to cope with depression. In sum, depression often goes untreated in men and may manifest as aggression, being a workaholic, other addictions, or as not living up to one's potential. **If you are a man and notice any of these patterns in your life or experience persistent feelings of pessimism, lethargy, irritability, or sadness for two weeks or more, it's important to seek help.**

## Symptoms of Depression

- Overwhelming feelings of sadness or grief
- Feeling worthless, helpless, or hopeless
- Sleeping more or less than usual
- Eating more or less than usual
- Having difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Loss of interest in taking part in activities
- Decreased sex drive
- Avoiding other people
- Feeling unreasonable guilt
- Problems with memory
- Chronic pain or bodily symptoms that have no medical cause

- Low frustration tolerance
- Irritable or restless
- Impulsivity
- Loss of energy, feeling very tired
- Low self-esteem
- Thoughts of death or suicide

### **Risk Factors Associated with Depression**

- perseverating on negative thoughts
- Recent negative life events (e.g. loss of a loved one, moving, family problem)
- Chronic stressors (e.g. illness, care giving, academic struggles)
- Low self-esteem
- Lack of closeness with family and friends
- Traumatic experiences (e.g. sexual abuse, violence, rape)
- Family history of mood disorder
- Family history of addictions (e.g. drug or alcohol abuse)

### **A Note about Bipolar Disorder**

You may have heard about manic-depressive illness or bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder is another mood disorder that is characterized by episodes of both depression and mania. In bipolar disorder there are mood changes that go from one extreme to another. One's mood changes from feeling depressed as described above to feeling manic. A manic episode is experienced as feeling "up", irritable, having an inflated self-esteem or grandiose ideas, increased energy and focused activity, staying awake for days straight but with a lot of energy, having racing thoughts, and impulsive or reckless behavior (e.g. spending sprees, foolish business investments, or sexual promiscuity). These mood swings can be rapid or occur over several weeks. Medication can be helpful in controlling or preventing the recurrence of manic and depressive episodes.

### **Depression and Non-Prescribed Drugs**

Sometimes depression is caused by the use of drugs such as alcohol or marijuana, and other mind altering drugs. Sometimes a person begins using drugs as a means of fitting in with their social group, or to cope with feelings of anxiety or depression. Over time these drugs alter the brain in ways that cause depression (see symptoms of depression above) among other damaging effects. **It is important that when you have depression and use alcohol or illicit drugs that you seek treatment sooner rather than later.**

## **Depression and your Overall Health**

Your health is the result of mind-body-spirit interactions. There are medical conditions (such as hypothyroidism and some brain disorders, among others) that can be mistaken for symptoms of depression. It is important to have a complete physical work-up to rule out medical causes for what appears to be depression. Also, with depression there is a possibility for co-occurring issues and illnesses. There is a relationship between eating disorders and depression. Someone has said that it's easier to stuff your face than face your stuff. Also, one out of 3 depressed people suffer from some form of substance abuse or dependence. In addition, researchers at Carnegie Mellon University's Laboratory for the Study of Stress, Immunity and Disease has found that immune function is related to feelings of loneliness and social isolation, some symptoms of depression. Feelings of loneliness and social isolation may weaken your immune response. People who are lonely and feel less connected and supported may visit their medical doctor more frequently. They also seem to need a longer time for recovery when they experience acute illness. There is a relationship between mental, spiritual and physical health.

## **Suicide and Depression**

Men are more likely than women to die by suicide. Thoughts of death or suicide are usually signs of severe depression. Suicidal feelings, thoughts, impulses, gestures, or behaviors always should be taken seriously. If you are thinking about hurting or killing yourself, SEEK HELP IMMEDIATELY. Call 911 or go to your nearest hospital emergency room. If you know someone who has thoughts of suicide get them professional help or offer to take them to the nearest hospital emergency room.

## **Treatment & Coping Skills for Depression**

Depression can be treated successfully by psychotherapy, medication, or a combination of both psychotherapy and medication.

Psychotherapy or counseling is a treatment in which people, through the help of a therapist, talk about the problems they are experiencing and find helpful ways of coping with difficulties in their lives. Therapists give support, expert feedback, interpretations, and guidance, and help people find solutions to their concerns. Counseling works and can help you heal.

Medication used to treat depression are called anti-depressant drugs. These drugs act on brain chemicals which affect the way one feels. Anti-depressants usually take 2 to 3

weeks to start working and may have side effects. If you are prescribed medication by a psychiatrist you should follow up and be monitored by the psychiatrist.

Other helpful activities in managing depression are staying active through exercise, creating a support system by not isolating from friends and family, and engaging in activities that are positive and fun. Healthy eating habits, a regular sleep schedule, meditation, listening to music, self help books, and an optimistic view of life are also important. These lifestyle skills cost you nothing but you gain health.

Professionals have noted the reluctance of some men to seek therapy. Men need to know there is no shame in getting professional help. The fear of what others might think should not stop a man from doing what is best for his well being. **Counseling works!**

### **For Further reading on Depression**

*Darkness visible: A memoir of madness* by William Styron. 1992. Vintage.

*I don't want to talk about it: Overcoming the secret legacy of male depression* by Terrence Real. 1997. Scribner.

*The noonday demon: An atlas of depression* by Andrew Solomon. 2002. Scribner.

\*\* This information is for educational purposes and is not intended to replace the advice of your mental health provider.

**For a consultation with Dr. Boatswain call 914-282-3395 or email [drboatswain@godsendpsychologist.com](mailto:drboatswain@godsendpsychologist.com)**