

Managing Symptoms of Depression

Gustavus Adolphus College Counseling Center

Many people experience the first symptoms of depression during their college years. Depression is a common yet serious mental health concern typically marked by sad or anxious feelings. Most college students occasionally feel sad or anxious, but these emotions usually pass quickly—within a couple of days. Untreated depression lasts for a long time, interferes with day-to-day activities, and is much more than just being "a little down" or "feeling blue."

In 2011, the American College Health Association–National College Health Assessment (a nationwide survey of college students at 2- and 4-year institutions) found that about 30 percent of college students reported feeling "so depressed that it was difficult to function" at some time in the past year. College can often be difficult for students as they transition into adulthood, explore their identity, consider their future, and manage changes within social and familial relationships.

There are many other factors that contribute to depression. The following factors both influence depression *and* are impacted by depression:



This is by no means an exhaustive list of factors that contribute to depression, but it may give you a sense of the areas in your life that need more attention in order to manage your symptoms more effectively. Improvement in one area of your life will inevitably lead to improvement among many of these factors!

Depression can present in many different ways and is usually comprised of a number of symptoms that interfere with one's functioning (work, academics, sleep, eating, etc.). Symptoms may include:

- Sadness, anxiety, or "empty" feelings
- Decreased energy, fatigue, or feeling "slowed down"
- Loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities
- Appetite and weight changes (weight loss/gain)
- Sleep disturbances (insomnia, oversleeping, waking much earlier than usual)
- Feelings of hopelessness, guilt, and/or worthlessness
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Difficulty concentrating, making decisions, remembering information, and/or learning
- Irritability and/or excessive crying
- Aches or pains not explained by other physical conditions

If you have depression, you may feel exhausted, helpless, and hopeless; however, it's important to realize that these feelings are part of the illness. Treatment can help you feel better, and there are many things you can do on your own to help yourself feel better, too.

To help yourself feel better:

- Try to see a professional as soon as possible—research shows that getting treatment sooner rather than later can relieve symptoms quicker and reduce the length of time treatment is needed
- Give treatment a fair chance—attend sessions and follow your doctor's or therapist's advice, including advice about specific exercises or "homework" to try between appointments
- Break up large tasks into small ones, and do what you can as you can; try not to do too many things at once
- Spend time with other people and talk to a friend or relative about your feelings
- Do not make important decisions until you feel better; talk about decisions with others whom you trust and who know you well
- Engage in mild physical activity or exercise
- Eat balanced, consistent meals that are good for your body and contribute to a sense of health
- Participate in activities that you used to enjoy
- Expect your mood to improve gradually with treatment
- Sleep regularly for 7-9 hours per night in order to regulate your body and energize yourself
- Reduce stressors in life – say "no" to activities that contribute to significant stress
- Remember that positive thinking will overcome negative thoughts as your depression responds to treatment
- Be kind and compassionate to yourself!

Staff members of the **Gustavus Counseling Center** and **Health Service** are here to support you! The Counseling Center may be reached at (507) 933-7027, and the Health Service at (507) 933-7630. In emergency situations, contact Campus Safety at (507) 933-8888 or call 911.

Reference: National Institute of Mental Health