

A guide to **UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION**



Developed as part of
ICMR's Multistate Implementation Research Study on Improving
Mental Well Being Among School and College Students





about

UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION

We all have moods- sometimes we feel happy and excited, other times we feel a little down or frustrated. It is completely natural for our emotions to change based on what is happening in our lives. Maybe you did not get the grades you wanted, had an argument with a friend, or just woke up feeling low. These feelings come and go, and most of the time, they pass on their own. **But what happens when that low feeling does not go away? What if it lingers, getting heavier day by day?**

Let us meet Maya. Maya used to love playing guitar, hanging out with her friends, and binge-watching her favorite shows. But lately, things feel... different. She wakes up exhausted, even after a full night's sleep. The music that once made her feel alive now sounds dull. She finds herself pulling away from friends, skipping plans, and wondering why everything feels so heavy. **Maya is not just feeling "sad"—she is struggling with something deeper. And she is not alone.**



Depression can feel like carrying around an **invisible weight** that no one else can see. But it is not just **“feeling down”** or being **“dramatic”**. It is real, and it can make everyday life feel like an **uphill battle**. The good news? **There are ways to manage it, lighten the load, and start feeling better. This guide is here to help you understand what is going on and what you can do about it.**

So, let us dive in.

What is Depression?

Depression is a mental health condition that can affect how you feel, think, and act. It is not just about being **sad**- it can also make you **feel numb, hopeless, or just “not like yourself”**. It can last for **weeks, months, or even longer** if left unaddressed. **Depression isn’t a weakness**, and it is not something you can just **“snap out of”**. It is a real **condition that deserves real support**.

Depression exists on a spectrum. **Feeling low can range from occasional sadness to a deep, overwhelming sense of hopelessness**. While everyone experiences sadness from time to time, depression is different—**it can last longer, affect daily life, and may not always have an obvious reason**.



Difference Between Depression and Sadness/Stress

We all have bad days. Maybe you did not get selected for the annual play, had a disagreement with a colleague, or just woke up in a “blah” mood. But depression sticks around, even when there seems no apparent or clear reason for feeling low.

Let us understand some of the commonly used feeling words and how they differ from each other:

Sadness = A reaction to something unpleasant. It comes and goes. For example, feeling sad when a friend does not invite you to a party.



Stress = Feeling overwhelmed by pressure but still able to push through. We usually feel this before an important test/examination, or performing in front of an audience, or confronting a friend/relative about a relationship issue.



Depression = Feeling persistently low, even when there’s no clear reason. Depression is diagnosed when a person experiences persistent sadness or loss of interest in daily activities for at least two weeks, along with other symptoms like changes in sleep, appetite, energy levels, concentration, feelings of guilt or worthlessness, and, in some cases, thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

Why Do We Experience Depression?

Depression does not have a single cause- it is often a mix of different factors that come together and affect how we feel. Here are some key reasons why people experience depression:

What is Happening Around You

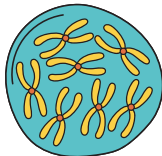
Life Events and Stress: Major life changes, trauma, loss, bullying, or ongoing stress (like school pressure or family conflicts) can contribute to depression. It is not always about one big event—it can be the buildup of many smaller struggles over time.



Lack of Social Support: Feeling isolated or disconnected from friends and family can make depression more difficult to manage. Having people to talk to and lean on is an important protective factor.

What is Happening Within You

Thought Patterns: The way we think can influence how we feel. Negative thinking habits—like constantly blaming yourself, expecting the worst, or feeling like nothing will ever improve—can make depression worse and harder to escape.



Genetics: If depression runs in the family, you might have a higher chance of experiencing it yourself. It doesn't mean you will have depression, but it can increase the likelihood.

Physical Health and Lifestyle: Sleep deprivation, poor nutrition, and lack of physical activity can all contribute to depression. The mind and body are connected, and taking care of one helps the other.

What is Happening in Your Brain



Biological Factors: Sometimes, our brain chemistry plays a role. Depression can be linked to an imbalance of neurotransmitters—brain chemicals like serotonin and dopamine that help regulate mood.

Understanding why depression happens can help us realize that it is not our fault—it is a complex mix of factors, and it is okay to ask for help in managing it.



Let's Bust Some Myths About Depression



MYTH

Depression is just being lazy or overreacting.



Only adults get depressed.

If you have depression, you will feel sad all the time.



If you ignore depression, it will go away on its own.

Talking about depression makes it worse.



FACT

No! Depression is a real medical condition that affects your brain, body, and emotions. It is not about being "weak"—**it is about needing support, just like if you had a broken arm.**

Teens and even kids can experience depression. As per the United Nations Children's Fund, one in every seven young people in India feels depressed or has little interest in activities.



Depression isn't just about sadness. **It can feel like numbness, exhaustion, irritation, or just not caring about anything anymore.**

It does not. Ignoring it can make things worse. **Reaching out to friends, family and professionals for support can help in coping with depression** and can also make the journey less lonely.

On the contrary, talking about depression with someone you trust is considered a healthy first-step towards coping with depression. **Bottling up feelings can make things harder, but opening up to someone you trust can be a game-changer.**

Signs and Symptoms of Depression In Yourself

3B's Snapshot

Identifying depression is an important task. The 3B's- Brain, Body and Behavior- can be useful in identifying potential signs of depression.

Brain:



Difficulty in concentration, memory, decision-making.



Negative self-talk, self-criticism, feelings of hopelessness.



Feeling sad or empty most of the time



Loss of interest in things you once enjoyed



Possible prevalence of ideas of suicide or self-harm

Body:



Low energy or feeling exhausted all the time



Unexplained physical complaints such as headaches or stomach aches



Poor personal hygiene



Weight loss or weight gain

Behaviour:



Not wanting to meet people or hang out with friends/family



Decline in academic performance



Feeling irritable



Trouble sleeping or sleeping too much



Changes in appetite (eating too much or too little)

In Friends/Others

**THEY SEEM WITHDRAWN
OR DISTANT**

**THEY STOP TAKING CARE OF
THEMSELVES (HYGIENE,
APPEARANCE, ETC.)**



**THEIR GRADES
SUDDENLY DROP**

**THEY JOKE ABOUT
"NOT WANTING TO
BE HERE"**

**THEY ACT MORE
IRRITABLE
OR ANGRY THAN
USUAL**

**THEY SEEM OVERLY TIRED
OR UNINTERESTED IN THINGS**

What is the Impact of Depression?

Living with depression can affect many areas of our lives, such as:



Poor academic achievement



Loss of interest in activities



Inability to concentrate



Low self-esteem



Poor health due to reduced
appetite and sleep



Difficulty in interpersonal
relationship



Lack of energy to do
everyday activities



Increased thoughts of death
and suicide



Difficulty in identity formation:
Feeling unsure of who you are
and what are your strengths



Increased risk of
substance use

As you can see, depression can have some scary outcomes. Therefore, it is crucial to talk about it to someone and find ways to cope with it.

Coping Strategies for Managing Depression

- **Reframe Negative Thoughts:** Usually depressive feelings are related to negative and unhelpful thought patterns such as:
- **Hopelessness:** “Nothing will ever get better”
- **Negative Self-Perception:** “I am worthless”; “Nobody cares about me”
- **Pessimism About the Future:** “Things will never improve”
- **Self Blame:** “I am the reason for all my problems”
- **Lack of Interest:** “I don't care about anything anymore”

Challenge thoughts like

“**I'm a failure**” with “**I'm having a tough time, but I'm trying.**”

Reframe Negative Thoughts

Here are some creative activities that can help with challenging the negative thoughts:

The Thought Monster Collage

What You Need: Magazines, newspapers, scissors, glue, paper, markers

- Think of a common negative thought you have
- (e.g., "I'm not good enough").
- Imagine this thought as a monster—what does it look like? Is it big and loud or sneaky and quiet?
- Use magazine clippings, drawings, and words to create a collage representing your "Thought Monster."
- Next, create a "Truth Warrior"—this is a positive or more balanced version of yourself that fights back against the monster.
- Compare the two: What does the Truth Warrior say to challenge the Thought Monster? Write or draw their conversation.
- Reflect on how your thoughts aren't facts, and how you have the power to change the narrative.



Rewrite the Script

What You Need: Paper, pen, optional props or voice recording

- Pick a negative thought you often have
- (e.g., "Nobody likes me").
- Write a mini script where this thought is challenged.
- Example: You write a scene where a kind, wise character (like a mentor or future-you) talks to the "negative thought character" and counters it with facts, compassion, and perspective.
- Act it out alone, with friends, or even record it as a voice note.
- Hearing a more rational, kind voice outside your head can make it feel more real and believable.



Small Goals: Break big tasks into tiny steps to avoid feeling overwhelmed.



Gratitude Journaling: List three things you are grateful for each day.

When you are feeling low, even small tasks can feel overwhelming. Instead of focusing on big goals, break them down into smaller, achievable steps using **the 3-Step Ladder Approach:**



These steps make big goals feel less overwhelming, while small wins build motivation and confidence. Overall, your progress feels real and achievable.



Problem Solving Skills

Sometimes, depression can make problems feel impossible to solve. But learning how to break them down into smaller, manageable steps can make a big difference. One of the best ways to do this is through the STEP Approach.



The STEP Approach to Problem-Solving

1

Stop and Identify the Problem

What is bothering you? Be specific. Instead of "Everything is bad," try, "I am struggling with keeping up with schoolwork."

2

Think of Possible Solutions

Brainstorm all the ways you could tackle this. Don't filter—write down even the wild ideas! Example:

- Ask a teacher for help.
- Break assignments into smaller parts.
- Create a study schedule.
- Form a study group.

3

Evaluate the Options

What are the pros and cons of each solution?
Which ones feel realistic and doable right now?
Pick the best option to try first.

4

Proceed with Action

Put your chosen solution into motion.
If it does not work, go back to your list
and try another one.



Emotion Regulation Techniques

Box Breathing: Inhale for 4 seconds, hold for 4, exhale for 4, hold for 4. Repeat.



Music Therapy: Make playlists that boost your mood or help you process emotions.



Grounding Techniques: Name five things you can see, four you can touch, three you can hear, two you can smell, and one you can taste.



Build Connections and Reach Out for Support

Depression often makes people want to withdraw from others, but staying connected is one of the best ways to cope. Strong relationships provide emotional support, a sense of belonging, and a reminder that you are not alone. Even small social interactions can help boost mood and reduce feelings of isolation.

- **Reconnect with Friends and Family:** Even when you do not feel like it, reaching out with a simple “Hi! How are you?” text can help you to rebuild connections.
- **Join a Club or a Group:** It can be anything like a sports team, art class, learning a new skill in a group- can give you a sense of belonging.
- **Volunteer or Help Someone:** Helping others or volunteering for social welfare can improve your mood and create meaningful connections.

Three Simple Social Skills to Strengthen Relationships

Listen attentively

Instead of just waiting for your turn to speak, listen carefully to the other person. Nod, show engagement, and ask follow-up questions.

Example: If a friend says, “I had a bad day,” instead of replying “Me too,” try asking, “What happened?”

Express yourself clearly

Without blaming others, use “I” statements to express your feelings.

Example: Instead of saying, “You never message me first,” try saying, “I miss talking to you—can we spend a little more time catching up?”

Appreciate through words and accept appreciation from others

A small compliment can brighten someone’s day and make social interactions smoother.

Example: “That hoodie looks really good on you!” or “I like your creativity.”

Relationships don’t have to be perfect. Even small efforts can build a strong support system, making it easier to cope with difficult emotions.

Self-Care

The important idea is to do small pleasurable activities everyday to keep your mood elevated.

- **Movement:** Even a 5-minute walk can help.
- **Sunlight:** Natural light boosts mood-regulating chemicals in the brain.
- **Sleep Hygiene:** Set a sleep routine and avoid screens before bed.



source:freepik

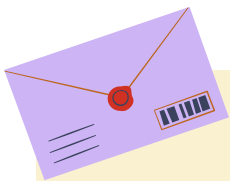
Reaching Out for Help

- **Talk to Someone You Trust:** A friend, family member, or school counselor.
- **Professional Help:** Therapy isn't just for extreme cases—it's like a coach for your mind.
- **Crisis Helplines:** If you are feeling overwhelmed, there are people ready to listen.



It's okay to ask for help.

source:visualtummy



Write Yourself A Letter

Imagine a Future You

Picture yourself six months from now, where you have been working on feeling better and things have improved. What is different? What have you achieved?

Write a Letter from the Future You to Present You

You can start with "Hi! I know things feel tough right now, but I promise it will get better..."

Describe how things improved, what steps helped, and how the future feels.

Offer words of encouragement and helpful advice.

Seal it and Save or Put it up as a Reminder

This will help you focus on possibilities rather than struggles, creating a sense of hope and motivation.

You are not alone.

Depression can deceive you and make you think that things will not get better, but they can.

Small steps matter. Reach out, take care of yourself, and know that brighter days are ahead.



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