

Understanding Major Depressive Disorder (MDD)

This resource will help you better understand your condition and outlines some effective ways to manage it.



Key points:

- 💡 **Major depressive disorder (MDD)** is a mood disorder characterized by a persistently **depressed mood** (feeling very sad or down) or a **persistent loss of pleasure or interest** in activities that are usually pleasurable or interesting to you.
- 💡 To be diagnosed with MDD, you must have experienced persistent depression symptoms (lasting for at least two weeks) that are distinctly different from your usual mood and impact your ability to function normally.
- 💡 MDD is common and usually a **highly treatable medical condition**. It is not a personal weakness.
- 💡 **Medication might be necessary** to fully treat depression symptoms, depending on their severity. Talk therapy and other complementary treatments may also be very helpful.

What is MDD?

Occasional feelings of sadness are a normal part of life and usually resolve on their own or as circumstances change. However, when sadness or loss of interest is severe and persistent and is impacting your functioning at work or school, at home, or socially, that's when a diagnosis of MDD may be appropriate.

MDD is a mental illness but can also have profound **impacts on physical health**. A diagnosis of MDD can increase the risk of developing other psychiatric diagnoses (e.g., anxiety disorders) and physical disorders (e.g., cardiovascular disease, obesity). That's why it's critical to talk to your health care provider so both your mental and physical health concerns can be appropriately addressed.

The feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness commonly associated with MDD are isolating and distressing, so it's important to know the facts and seek help. **The right care plan can help you get back to your usual self as soon as possible and stay well.**

To be diagnosed with MDD, you must have had at least one depressive episode, with symptoms lasting for at least two weeks, and representing a distinct change from your usual mood and normal functioning. **To get well and stay well, it's essential to have the right diagnosis and receive treatment that's personalized for your unique needs.**

How do I know I have MDD?

What does a major depressive episode look like?

During a major depressive episode, you might experience:

- A persistently sad, down or depressed mood (note: some people with MDD report feeling nothing or a lack of any emotions); and/or
- A loss of interest or pleasure in activities that are usually interesting or pleasurable
- A combination of the following symptoms:
 - Feeling empty, hopeless or worthless
 - Persistent thoughts that you might be better off dead or an active plan for suicide
 - Difficulty with memory, concentration or decision-making
 - Changes in appetite and sleep pattern
 - Low energy level/fatigue

Seasonal pattern

- Some people experience a **seasonal pattern** of depression.
- Most commonly, seasonal depression symptoms start in the fall and improve or resolve in the spring or summer months.



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How is MDD treated?

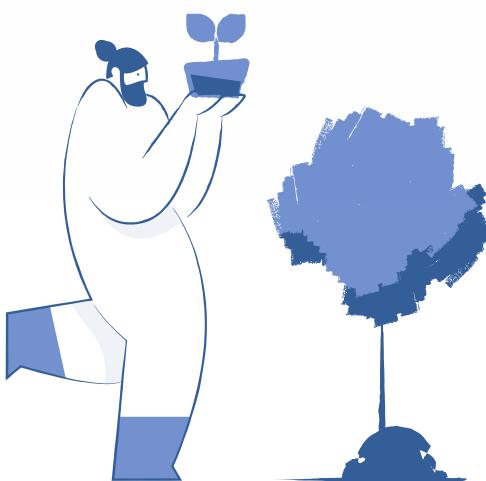
Treatment goals: To fully manage depression symptoms, get you back to full functioning, and restore your quality of life.

Medication

- The decision to take any treatment is deeply personal, but it's important to have access to high-quality medical information to help guide your decision.
- Medication **may be helpful for managing depression symptoms**, depending on the severity of your symptoms and the number and severity of any previous depression episodes.
- There are several different types of medications that can help to manage depression symptoms, including antidepressants, antipsychotics*, and occasionally, mood stabilizers.

**Note: The term "antipsychotic" is unfortunate because these medications can be helpful for managing a variety of symptoms, including depression and anxiety symptoms.*

- **Antidepressants** were developed specifically to treat depression, but many have been found to treat other symptoms commonly associated with depression, such as anxiety, pain, and other psychiatric symptoms. Antidepressants primarily work by altering the brain chemicals called neurotransmitters, especially serotonin and norepinephrine.
- Treatment choice could be influenced by what you've tried before—and whether it helped and was well tolerated—as well as the presence of other conditions (e.g., anxiety, insomnia, obesity, pain).
- **Personalization:** For all psychiatric diagnoses, finding the right treatment often requires trial and error, because everyone has unique needs. There are many antidepressants with robust evidence for safety and efficacy. Since each has a unique profile, your healthcare provider can help you choose a medication that is tailored to suit your needs and minimize unwanted side effects.



Antipsychotics?!

While these medications were developed to treat psychotic symptoms, they can be very effective for treating severe depression, even if you don't have psychosis. They are typically used as an add-on when an antidepressant alone is not fully addressing your symptoms. Like antidepressants, antipsychotics alter neurotransmitters, especially dopamine and serotonin. Some antipsychotics also improve anxiety symptoms and stabilize mood in people diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

Psychological Therapies

- Psychological therapies have a great deal of scientific evidence to support their value, either on their own or along with medication.
- Psychological therapies are designed to help you identify and reframe unhelpful thoughts, beliefs, and behaviours that contribute to depression or anxiety symptoms, enhance coping skills, improve relationships, manage anxiety, support a return to full functioning, and promote well-being.
- Common options: cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), behavioural activation (BA), interpersonal therapy (IPT), mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT)
- Individual and group formats are generally available, with many modes of delivery (e.g., in person or virtual; with a therapist or self-directed).
- A psychotherapy plan can be tailored to address your specific needs.

Complementary Therapies

- These are options that are supported by scientific evidence and may complement medication and talk therapy.
- Common options include regular physical activity, yoga and mindfulness meditation, following a Mediterranean diet, light therapy, and using an omega-3 fatty acid supplement.
- Physical activity is a really important part of depression and anxiety management and doesn't take as much time as most people think. Thirty minutes of mild to moderate physical activity (e.g., a brisk walk) five times a week can have a meaningful impact on the brain chemicals that reduce depression and anxiety.