

Major Depressive Disorder

If you have experienced depression, you are not alone. Most of us feel sad or depressed at some point in our lives. These feelings, however, are different than Major Depressive Disorder. MDD is a clinical disorder in which individuals experience symptoms severe enough to have a negative impact on their academic, career, or social functioning over a certain amount of time. This experience is called a depressive episode. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, approximately 17.3 million (7.1%) adults in the U.S. have had at least one major depressive episode. These episodes may occur once or several times throughout a person's life. Continue reading to learn more about MDD, its causes, and how CBT can help.

What is Major Depressive Disorder?

The primary feature of MDD is a depressed mood and/or loss of interest or pleasure in daily activities. From a CBT perspective, MDD is caused by negative thoughts about yourself, your environment, and/or your future. Some of the symptoms associated with MDD include:

- Feelings of sadness, tearfulness, emptiness, or hopelessness
- Angry outbursts, irritability or frustration, even over small matters
- Loss of interest or pleasure in most or all normal activities, such as sex, hobbies, or sports
- Sleep disturbances, including insomnia or sleeping too much
- Tiredness and lack of energy, so even small tasks take extra effort
- Reduced appetite and weight loss or increased cravings for food and weight gain
- Anxiety, agitation, or restlessness
- Slowed thinking, speaking, or body movements
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt, fixating on past failures, or self-blame
- Trouble thinking, concentrating, making decisions, and remembering things
- Frequent or recurrent thoughts of death, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, or suicide
- Unexplained physical problems, such as back pain or headaches

How Does Major Depressive Disorder Develop?

Depression has many causes. Some individuals have a genetic predisposition to depression. This means that genes passed down through family members may affect their brain's chemistry, making them more prone to depression. Other individuals may experience depression in response to life events such as difficulties in relationships, stress, or situations in which they perceive themselves to be helpless. For these individuals, these events activate negative beliefs they already have about themselves, which causes them to attribute their difficulties to flaws within themselves and an unfair world, leading to a bleak perception about the future. In CBT, these negative thoughts about oneself, the environment, and the future are called the *cognitive*

*triad*¹. Once these negative thoughts are activated, you may experience emotional symptoms such as sadness or hopelessness, behavioral symptoms such as crying or isolating yourself from others, physiological symptoms such as tiredness or a lack of energy, and/or a lack of motivation.

How Can CBT and Mindfulness Help With Major Depressive Disorder?

CBT for depression focuses on teaching you to identify and challenge your negative ways of thinking. During therapy, your therapist will help you examine thoughts that occur during daily situations, as well as negative beliefs about yourself and/or the world that lead to these thoughts. With this information, you and your therapist can begin to identify new, more adaptive ways of viewing these situations and beliefs. Because depression often causes individuals to lose motivation, worsening their depression, you and your therapist may also decide behavioral and mindfulness interventions may be helpful as well. Behavioral interventions may include identifying activities that give you a sense of accomplishment or pleasure and scheduling more of these activities into your daily routine. Mindfulness activities such as imagery or guided meditation may be used to help you be kinder and more compassionate to yourself, while also encouraging you to let go of your negative thinking and focus on your goals and values instead.

¹ Beck, J. (2020). *Cognitive behavior therapy: Basics and beyond* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.