

Women and Depression

Treatment and support recommendations for women suffering from depression.

By Carrier Carter, M.D.

Q: A lot of women in my MOPS group (including me) have struggled with depression-both postpartum and depression in general. What form of treatment do you recommend?

A: I empathize with you deeply, for I, too, have spent many sojourns down deep in the well of depression. When in that dark, isolated place, each of us needs someone to toss down a "rope" to help pull us out. That "rope" or treatment may come in the form of support from loved ones, the help of a counselor or mental health treatment with medications by a psychiatrist, or all the above! Your job is to let others know you need help and then grab onto the "rope" and hold on.

But getting out and staying out of the well are complicated by several issues, such as your type of depression, finding the combination of treatments most effective for you, having ongoing support from loved ones, plus sorting out what triggered your depression.

Why Moms Hide It

Unfortunately, guilt, embarrassment and fear make many moms hide their pain. Many women think depression is their fault, or fear that it shows they aren't good mothers or good Christians. Others are embarrassed because their family does not understand and tells them, "Cheer up!" "Snap out of it!" Or they ask, "Why are you so sad? Life is not that bad!" But in truth, life *is that bad* for the very depressed.

Many moms don't intentionally hide their depression. They don't realize depression is what's making their path so dark and their outlook so bleak. This is why we all need to know the symptoms of depression since it often takes a husband, relative or friend to enlighten and persuade a depressed woman to get help.

Signs and Symptoms

How depression "looks" varies widely, but most who are depressed show five or more of the following for at least two weeks:

- Sadness, unhappiness, tearfulness
- Sleeping excessively or being unable to sleep
- Loss of energy
- Loss of interest in things you previously enjoyed
- Irritability
- Difficulty thinking or concentrating
- Sudden change in appetite
- Physical discomfort
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Thoughts of suicide or death

Types and Causes

When you feel depressed, there's a reason you feel as you do. The reasons vary widely from biochemical causes to situational causes. Often it's a combination of causes that include:

- *Hormone shifts.* Postpartum, Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS), Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD) and perimenopause.
- *Biochemical imbalance, inherited or other cause.* Depletion of brain chemicals.
- *Winter depression (known as S.A.D.: Seasonal Affective Disorder).* When sunlight levels drop, these women may need light therapy to balance brain chemicals.
- *Unresolved anger turned inward.*
- *Your situation does not match your expectations.*
- *Your needs are not being met.* Sleep deprivation, other physical needs, emotional, mental and spiritual needs.
- *Issues from your own childhood that often emerge when you become a parent.*

Tailored Treatments

Since the causes of depression vary from biochemical to situational, and may be a combination, effective therapy

may vary from medication to counseling to practical helps from family and friends with meals, naps and childcare assistance. The right treatment combination differs for each woman.

When there's a biochemical imbalance, medication can be a lifesaver. Since various antidepressants differ in how they help your brain chemistry, your doctor may have to try a couple different meds to find the best medication for you. The right medication can make you feel "normal" again. Since some imbalances are temporary, many women only require medication for months. But please don't stop medication abruptly or without your doctor's OK.

In nearly all situations (even biochemical imbalance), some counseling is crucial to help uncover and treat the causes of the depression. Try to be open with loved ones about what you need or need to resolve. Feed your spirit with prayer, read the psalms and remember God IS with you.

Your Life Is Precious

No matter how horrible depression makes you feel, you are always worthy of help. Your mind may tell you lies ? such as *everyone would be better off if you were dead*. But the truth is, your suicide would forever ruin the lives of those you love. Make a pact that suicide is NEVER an option, and promise you'll *call for help* immediately if you have:

- *Suicidal thoughts*
- *Plans to hurt your children*
- *Foreign "voices" in your head telling you to hurt yourself or others*

Feeling suicidal is a sign that you need support and treatment, not that your life is beyond repair.

Dr. Carrie Carter is a mother and national speaker on health issues. She served as a pediatrician for more than 10 years in San Diego, California, and wrote *A Woman's Guide to Good Health* (Spire/Revell, 2006), available in the MOPShop at www.MOPShop.org.

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