



ARTICLE

WELL-BEING

Am I Simply Sad, or Is It Something More?

By Erica Patino

Reviewed by Susan Ko, Ph.D.

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Everyone gets sad from time to time, whether it's due to the loss of a loved one, personal struggles, upsetting events or news headlines, or a combination of circumstances. And although there's nothing wrong with being sad, if the feeling persists for long enough, it may be important to seek professional support for your mental well-being. That's because lasting sadness can be a sign of depression.

What Is Sadness?

Even though sadness can get a bad rap, it's an emotion just like happiness, fear, and joy. It's a natural response that can be a healthy part of coping with feelings of loss or disappointment. However, sadness is different from feelings of depression because it's temporary.

Depending on the intensity of the feelings, sadness may last from a couple of hours to a few weeks, says [Tess Brigham](#), a licensed therapist based in San Francisco.

Sadness may feel like different things to different people. "Some people describe it as feeling low or down, or having a heaviness on their chest, and some describe it as having a dark cloud over them," says [Sid Khurana, M.D.](#), a board-certified psychiatrist at Nevada Mental Health, in Las Vegas. "And then some people describe sadness as difficult to tease apart from feeling mad or bad."

Like other emotions, sadness comes and goes in life. You may be sad when you go through something like a relationship breakup, but then you'll tend to recover and move on. "When you're sad, if you talk it out, [have a good cry](#), or maybe [go and exercise](#), the sadness will start to go away and you feel better," Brigham says. "It's when sadness stays with you despite your best efforts that it's problematic. Persistent sadness that lasts beyond two weeks can become depression."

What Is Depression?

Sadness that you can't shake after a few weeks isn't the only sign of depression. While you may say you "feel depressed" when you're occasionally feeling sad, clinical depression is a mood disorder that's characterized by the presence of several other symptoms, as well. According to the [American Psychiatric Association \(APA\)](#), these symptoms can include:

- Loss of interest or pleasure in things you usually enjoy
- Trouble sleeping, or sleeping too much
- Changes in appetite (either eating too much or too little)
- Changes in weight
- Fatigue
- Feeling worthless or guilty
- Difficulty thinking and concentrating
- Thoughts of death or suicide

If you find yourself becoming more isolated and withdrawn from others, that can also be a sign of depression. People who are close to you may also say they notice a change in your mood.

Depression also tends to interfere with your ability to function. "When someone is unable to function (go to work or meet personal or interpersonal commitments or obligations), that can be a big indicator that something more than typical sadness is going on," Khurana says. "Also, when

the state of sadness is just not getting better, or if you're not feeling like getting out of bed, then this may not be typical sadness—but rather the onset of a depressive disorder.”

What Should I Do If I Think I'm Depressed?

If you think you may be depressed, it's important not to keep it to yourself. Start by reaching out to your support system and letting them know what's going on. That can include your partner, parents, other family, or friends, says Khurana. Tell them how you're feeling and ask them to support you and hold you accountable to seek further help. Depression is a medical condition, and it responds well to treatment, according to the APA.

From there, you can make an appointment with your primary care physician (PCP), a therapist, or a psychiatrist. Describe your symptoms, how long you've experienced them, and what has and hasn't helped. “That way you can have the help to decide whether this is typical sadness, an adjustment reaction, or an episode of depression,” Khurana says. A PCP may refer you to a mental health professional for therapy and, in some cases, medication.

Remember that if you are depressed, it isn't because you did something wrong. Many factors can play into developing depression, such as your genetics; biochemistry; environmental factors, like neglect, abuse, or poverty; and personality traits.

Even if you don't think you're depressed but could use some help processing, it may still be a good idea to speak with your PCP, a therapist, or psychiatrist about your feelings. Your health and well-being are worth it.

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