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TIP SHEET: DEPRESSION

Symptoms of Depression

Experiencing at least 5 of the following symptoms more days than not for at least 2 weeks indicates *Major Depressive Disorder*:

- Depressed mood most of the day (mood can be irritable in children).
- Decreased interest or pleasure in all or almost all activities most of the day.
- Significant weight loss when not dieting or a decrease or increase in appetite.
- Difficulty sleeping, or sleeping too much.
- Noticeably physically agitated or slowed down, as observed by others.
- Fatigue or loss of energy.
- Feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt.
- Diminished ability to concentrate or make decisions
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide.

Symptoms of *Dysthymic Disorder* are similar to Major Depression, but less intense and longer lasting. Dysthymia involves depressed mood for most days over a period of two years (one year for children). Other symptoms may include appetite or sleep problems, poor self-image, concentration problems, fatigue, and/or hopelessness.

Bipolar Disorder generally involves periods of depression with alternating manic or hypomanic episodes, or mixed episodes of mania/hypomania and depression at the same time. There are different forms of Bipolar Disorder, but key features of mania include decreased need for sleep, racing thoughts, grand ideas, impaired judgment, excessive optimism, pressured speech, and/or increased activity for at least seven days. Hypomania is a less severe form of mania.

10 Tools to Improve Mood

- **Exercise** Exercise in and of itself is an evidence-supported treatment for depression. On average, it is considered to be at least moderately effective in improving mood. See our Exercise Tip Sheet for exercise ideas.
- **Sleep** Depression disrupts sleep, and poor sleep can cause depression or make depression worse. See our Sleep Problems and Insomnia Tip Sheets for suggestions for better sleep.
- **Activities** A key feature of depression is that it tends to make people lose interest in activities they used to enjoy. Research indicates that forcing yourself to do activities that you find pleasurable and/or make you feel competent is one of the best ways to improve depressed mood. It doesn't work immediately, but if you stick with it your mood will start to improve.
- **Life Situations and Problems** Research clearly indicates that working to improve marital and/or close relationships, expand social networks and social support, and improving assertiveness helps reduce depression. Life transitions such as going to college or retiring are also predictors of depression; determine how to make these transitions as smoothly as possible (including making sure that you have enough social support, accurate expectations, and satisfying activities).
- **Handling Thoughts** It is clear that negative thoughts make depression worse, regardless of whether the thoughts lead to depression or vice versa. What helps for some people is to think as accurately as possible about situations; for others it helps to think mindfully. See our Tip Sheets on these topics for ideas.
- **Handling Emotions** Many people who are depressed find they experience very intense feelings, or sometimes no feelings at all. Working on the other strategies on this Tip Sheet can help modify feelings. See our Managing Emotions Tip Sheet for more ideas.
- **Meaningful, Satisfying Lives** When depressed, many people think about the meaning of their lives. These thoughts can be made more productive by writing about what you want your life to stand for. Then think about your life as it is currently and what you would like it to be. Make a list of small, concrete steps you can take to achieve the life you would like to have.
- **Nutrition** A balanced diet helps many people manage mood changes. Additionally, omega-3 fatty acids may help antidepressants work more effectively.
- **Therapy** There are at least seven forms of therapy that have research support for improving depressed mood. The types of therapy with the strongest research evidence are Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Interpersonal Therapy for Depression (IPT), followed by problem-solving therapy. Couples therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), reminiscence therapy and short-term psychodynamic therapy also have research support. A mental health professional can help determine which type of therapy is most likely to work for you.
- **Medication** Antidepressant medications help. Combination treatment, such as therapy and medication, is most effective for many people. As a side note, make sure you see a physician if you are depressed; it is not uncommon for medical conditions to cause depression.

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