HAVE YOU HAD ANY OF THE FOLLOWING LATELY?
- Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless.
- Little interest or pleasure in doing things you used to enjoy (including sex).
- Loss of energy and motivation.
- Trouble sleeping or sleeping too much.
- Poor appetite or overeating.
- Digestive problems (dry mouth, constipation, diarrhea).
- Increased irritability.
- Problems with memory and concentration.
- Chronic pain.
- Physical symptoms that do not respond to medical treatment.
- Feelings of helplessness, guilt, and worthlessness.
- Thoughts or plans to harm yourself.

Everyone occasionally feels down or sad, but these feelings are usually fleeting and go away in a few days. However, if your feelings are persistent and interfering with your daily life, you may be suffering from depression. Keep reading, and consider taking the self-test at the end of this fact sheet.

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?
Depression is a common medical illness that results in decreased quality of life. When medical professionals talk about depression, they are referring to the medical illness known as Major Depression. A person with Major Depression typically has many of the symptoms listed above nearly every day, all day, and for at least 2 weeks.

Not everyone presents with feelings of sadness. Some people feel unusually tired and irritable; they may be unable to start or complete tasks. Physical complaints like those listed above are also common in depression. Whatever the combination of symptoms may be, they are often serious enough that they are having negative effects on school, work, and/or relationships.

DEPRESSION FACTS & FIGURES
- In the United States, 30% of the population will experience Major Depression at some point in their lives.
- Before puberty, males and females develop depression at the same rate. After puberty, women are twice as likely to develop depression.
- Depression is most common between the ages of 25 and 44.
- If untreated, Major Depression can last 6-12 months.
- Approximately half of those who experience a major depressive episode will experience a recurrence.

Though treatment of depression is almost always successful, less than half of those affected will seek treatment.

WHAT CAUSES DEPRESSION?
- Depression is thought to be a medical condition caused by an imbalance in one or more of the chemicals that transmit electrical signals between the cells in the brain.
- It is frequently a combination of a genetic predisposition and accumulated biologic and psychosocial stress. Significant life events, hormonal changes, medical illnesses, medications, and drug/alcohol abuse can all play a role.
- Depression is NOT caused by personal weakness or lack of willpower! It is a medical condition that can be treated and controlled, like high blood pressure or diabetes.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?
The good news is that if treated properly, the majority of people with Major Depression get better. Treatment consists of counseling, medications, or both. Depending on the severity of your symptoms, you and your healthcare provider will work together as a team to decide which treatment option is best for you.

❖ Counseling
Counseling alone can be very effective in treating mild to moderate depression. However, studies show that the most effective treatment for severe or chronic depression is a combination of counseling and medications.

A psychologist or a therapist may talk to you about things that are going on in your life, including school, work, and relationships. The focus may be on your behavior, how it's affecting you, and what you can do differently. Counseling also helps in identifying, examining, and changing negative thought patterns and beliefs.

Services are free to students at University Counseling Services, which has offices on both campuses:

❖ Monroe Park Campus
University Student Commons, Room 238
907 Floyd Ave.
828-6200
Mon – Fri: 8am – 5pm

❖ MCV Campus
VMI Buidling
1000 E. Marshall St, 4th Floor
828-3964
Mon: 11am – 8pm
Wed: 11am – 5pm
Tues, Thurs, Fri: 8am – 5pm

If you prefer to pursue counseling services off-campus, ask a Student Health staff member for a list of other providers in the Richmond area.
**Medications**

Several different classes of antidepressants work by correcting the chemical imbalance in the brain that causes depression. None of these medications are addictive. Antidepressants work differently for different people. A medicine that works well for one person may not work well for another. Unfortunately, we cannot predict which medication will work best for you. However, 50-60% of patients respond to the first medication they are prescribed.

- **How soon will medication work?**
  - Some patients notice an improvement as early as 1 week after starting medication. But it usually takes 4-6 weeks to experience the full effects of these medicines.
  - If no improvement is noted within 4-6 weeks, your healthcare provider may recommend a higher dose or a change in medication.

- **What are possible side effects?**
  - Side effects may occur during the first 1-2 weeks on the medication, but they should be mild and disappear after a few weeks.
  - Different antidepressants have different side effects. Some common ones include stomach upset, diarrhea, and changes in sleep or appetite.
  - Consult your healthcare provider if you experience intolerable side effects or worsening symptoms of depression.

**Note:** Some people develop an increase in suicidal thoughts while on medication. If this happens to you, stop the medication and contact your healthcare provider immediately!

- **For how long will I need medication?**
  How long you'll need to be on medication depends on you and your particular symptoms.
  - It is generally recommended that an effective medication be continued for 6-12 months after symptoms improve.
  - Longer treatment courses are recommended for patients who have had more than one depressive episode and for those with chronic depression.
  - Work with your healthcare provider to determine a regimen that fits your needs. The goal is to take the medication long enough to reduce the chance that the depression will come back.

Unless you have serious side effects, do not stop antidepressant medications without professional advice!

- Sudden discontinuation may cause dizziness, muscle aches, agitation, sleep disturbances, and possibly an increased chance of relapse.
- Medications should be tapered gradually to prevent these symptoms from occurring.

**WHAT ABOUT SUICIDAL THOUGHTS?**

People with depression sometimes think about suicide. Suicidal thoughts can be part of the depression. If you have thoughts about hurting yourself, especially if you think you may act on them, call someone immediately!

- Talk to your doctor, counselor, family, or friends.
- VCU has a trained counselor on call at all times for any emergency. Simply call 828-1234 (VCU Campus Police) and ask for the counselor-on-call.
- Professional assistance is also available through the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

**OTHER TREATMENT TIPS**

In addition to following the treatment plan recommended by your healthcare provider, here are some other suggestions that can make your recovery more successful:

- **Give yourself time.** Don't expect to do everything you normally can. Give yourself a realistic schedule, and try not to get discouraged.
- **Don't believe the negative thoughts you may have.** For example, blaming yourself or expecting failure is part of the depression. These thoughts normally go away as your depression improves.
- **Stay active.** Get involved in activities that make you feel good or feel like you've accomplished something.
- **Avoid isolating yourself.** Don't be afraid to talk to your family and friends. Use your church if you attend one, or consider joining a support group. Needing support from others is not a sign of weakness. It is a healthy way to deal with your depression.
- **Avoid making big life decisions** while you are depressed. If the decisions can't wait, seek help from someone you trust.
- **Exercise regularly.** Physical activity helps to improve mood over time by releasing natural endorphins that increase your sense of well-being.
- **Eat well-balanced meals.** You will not have the energy to get better if you are not fueling your body.
- **Maintain a regular sleep schedule.**
- **Avoid alcohol, illegal drugs, and excessive caffeine.** They can make depression worse and cause serious side effects when taken with antidepressants.

**SELF-HELP WEBSITE:**

- [www.students.vcu.edu/counseling/self-help/ucs.html](http://www.students.vcu.edu/counseling/self-help/ucs.html) (a great resource for access to online materials & support)

**The Depression Self-Test**


1. Do you feel lost, sad, or empty most of the day?
2. Have you lost interest or pleasure in activities you used to enjoy?
3. Have you experienced a significant increase or decrease in appetite?
4. Have you experienced significant weight gain or weight loss without dieting?
5. Have you experienced a significant change in sleeping habits?
6. Do you feel unusually restless or unusually sluggish or slowed down?
7. Do you feel unduly tired or fatigued?
8. Do you have persistent feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, or excessive guilt?
9. Do you have difficulty concentrating?
10. Do you have frequent thoughts of death or suicide?

If you answered “yes” to 5 or more of the above questions (including #1 or #2) and if your symptoms have been present for 2 or more weeks, you might be depressed. We strongly recommend making an appointment with a healthcare provider at Student Health or other medical facility for further evaluation and treatment.