

Disability Campaign.org

Chronic Illness, Disability, and Depression

Everyone feels sad from time to time; usually it's related to a difficult, hurtful, or disappointing event or experience. Often times, however, the sadness dissipates when our situations change or after we adjust to a loss or disappointment. But when a person constantly feels negative emotions such as sadness or lack of motivation, this may be a sign of depression. Depression is a mental illness that affects a person's thinking, emotions, perceptions, and behaviors. It can affect anyone, and it's estimated that more than 1 in 20 people in the U.S. live with major depression. Unfortunately, those numbers rise when it comes to people with disabilities and chronic illness. It's why if you or if a loved one is disabled or has a long-term illness, it's important you learn about the link between disability and depression, the signs of depression that are common among people with disabilities, and how to get help. Depression is a real illness: it should never be ignored and should be treated with the help of a professional medical care team.



The Link between Chronic Illness, Disability, and Depression

Numerous studies have been done on the association between having a disability or chronic illness and being depressed. It's been widely acknowledged that disability is a risk factor for late-life depression, and that those who are chronically ill or disabled (be it physically or mentally) are more likely to be diagnosed with depression at any point in their life. Below are some statistics on chronic illness, disability, and depression.

The Centers for Disease Control reported finding the following links between chronic illness and disability a [review study](#) published in 2005:

- Nearly **50% of asthma patients** may suffer from clinically depressive symptoms.

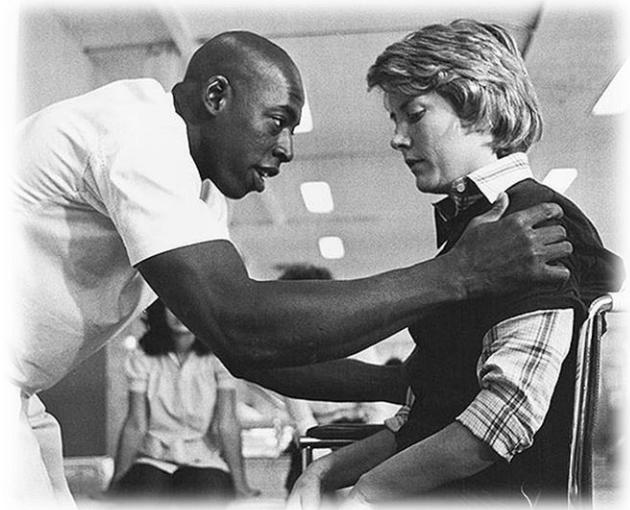


- **Depression and/or anxiety** are among the most commonly reported concerns by persons with arthritis.
- Depressive disorders are associated with **increased mortality** due to cardiovascular disease.
- A person with significant depressive symptoms is about **twice as likely** than those with few depressive symptoms to **have a stroke within 10 years**.
- **More than half of stroke patients** report depressive symptoms within 18 months of having a stroke.
- About **1 in 5 cancer patients** are reported to be depressed.
- Depressive symptoms are more likely to persist among people with **multiple diabetic-related complications** (such as blindness, amputation, or kidney failure) and those with less than a high-school education.
- Many who are chronically ill are at an increased risk of becoming obese, and it has been found that **women with a BMI ≥ 30** have a nearly **50% increase** in the lifetime prevalence of depressive disorders compared with non-obese women.

Disability, including physical and mental disability, have been found to be linked to depression as well.

Spinal Cord Injury

- The University of Washington estimates that about **1 in 5 people with spinal cord injury (SCI)** have clinical depression.
- A 2007 study indicated that children who have sustained a SCI are more prone to have depression as adults.
- Another study done in 2012 found that within six months after a SCI, patients had higher rate of depression and higher overall level of depression.



Autism Spectrum

- A study done in the UK, found that adults with autism who do not have a learning disability are **9 times** more likely to **die from suicide**.

Chronic Pain

- In a study published in 2015, it was reported that increased pain intensity predicts increased severity of depressive symptoms and worsening quality of life.

Parkinson's Disease

- Depression and anxiety are common among patients with Parkinson's disease, perhaps due to the changes in neurotransmitter systems (neurotransmitters are important chemicals for good brain and nerve health).
- A 2007 review of various studies argued that about 1 in 3 patients with Parkinson's disease live with depression.



People with Low Vision

- In a study that included a 2-year-follow up, it was found that most patients with low vision who had depressive symptoms remained depressed after two years.

Caregivers

- Depression is not limited to those with disabilities. In a study published in the Journal of Intellectual Disability Research, among mothers of children on the autism spectrum, moms whose children had intellectual disabilities in addition to autism had higher depression scores. Single mothers of children with disabilities were

found to be more susceptible to severe depression than moms living with a partner.

Why the higher risk?

It's clear that people with chronic illnesses and disabilities are more prone to become depressed at some point in their lifetime. There are several factors that contribute to why people with existing health problems and disabilities are more at risk, including:

- Difficulty adapting to a new way of living, particularly with physical disabilities or illnesses that require large lifestyle changes or serious treatment.
- Feelings of anger, sadness, or frustration associated with the cause of the disability.
- A sense of grief over lost physical or mental abilities.
- Decreased engagement in social or physical activities, perhaps due to pain or limited mobility.
- Financial difficulties associated with the cost of medical care or loss of employment.
- A feeling of being a burden to loved ones or caregivers.
- Side effects of medications that lead people to feel more down or unable to do what they enjoy.
- Changes in sleep patterns, including decreased sleep or lack of restful sleep.
- Weight gain or loss caused by changes in appetite and mobility.

Common Signs of Depression

- Depressed mood
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Feeling fatigued or in pain
- Being less social or more isolated
- Trouble concentrating
- Alcohol, illegal drug, or prescription drug abuse
- Feelings of guilt
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide
- Attempted suicide

If you or a loved one is exhibiting these common signs of depression, consider taking this [depression checklist](#) to evaluate how you've been feeling over the past two weeks. After you've completed it, share it with your doctor. This will help you get a conversation started about depression and its impact on your overall health.



Treatment Options

Depression is not something to be ignored, especially if you have an existing medical illness or disability, as depression can lead to an overall worsening of health. If you or a family member are depressed, make an appointment to talk with your doctor over how you can better manage your depression and your disability. He or she may recommend you see a therapist or counselor to be able to talk about your feelings; if medical treatment is something you and your doctor believe would be appropriate for you, an antidepressant medication may be prescribed. If, though, you or a loved one is experiencing thoughts of suicidal, it's important that immediate help be sought. You can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255, available 24 hours everyday, or checkout our resource sheet on ["How to Help a Friend Who May Be Suicidal."](#)

Living with a disability or chronic illness is hard enough, so do your best to surround yourself by positive people who will help to encourage you along the way. Think about joining a support group, become more involved with your community or place of worship, volunteer to serve others in need, and brainstorm on how to find ways to stay engaged. Read more on depression coping strategies by downloading our free resource sheet: [“Strategies to Help Fight Depression.”](#)



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