Understanding Depression

A plain-language guide to the signs, the small steps, and when to ask for help.

For general education only. Not a substitute for therapy, diagnosis, or medical care.

What depression is

Depression is more than sadness. It is a cluster of changes in mood, energy, thinking, sleep, and appetite that can persist for weeks and make ordinary tasks feel heavy.

It is common, it is treatable, and it is not a character flaw or a lack of willpower. Two people with the same diagnosis can look nothing alike from the outside.

Signs people notice

- In energy and body: Tiredness that rest does not fix, slower movement, unexplained aches, appetite or weight change, sleep that runs long, short, or broken.
- In thinking and mood: Flatness, irritability, guilt, harsh self-criticism, difficulty concentrating, memory slips, a sense that nothing will improve.
- In connection and routine: Canceling plans, answering messages late, dropping hobbies, work slipping, leaning on alcohol to get through the evening.

What tends to help

- Schedule one small action a day and do it before the mood improves. Waiting for motivation usually backfires.
- Keep a rough sleep and meal rhythm, even on days you do not leave the house.
- Get outside daylight and move for ten minutes.
- Tell one honest person what you have been carrying.
- Start therapy, or return to it if you stopped. Structured support helps many people.
- Ask a prescriber whether medication fits your circumstances. It helps some people and not others.

What tends not to help

- Waiting for motivation to arrive before you act.
- Dropping the people who usually check on you.

If thoughts of self-harm appear

If you are having thoughts of hurting yourself, call or text 988 any time, day or night. If you are in immediate danger, call 911. Telling someone early is easier than telling them at the edge.

When to reach out for support

- The low period has lasted more than two weeks.
- You cannot hold work, school, or caregiving together.
- You have stopped seeing the people who usually check on you.
- You are drinking or using substances to manage how you feel.
- You have been thinking about death or about not being here.

A few prompts

1. What did yesterday actually look like, hour by hour?

2. Which one thing drained me most, and which one did not feel impossible?

3. What is one action small enough to do tomorrow without feeling heroic?

4. Who could I tell this week, even in a sentence?

Questions worth asking a therapist

- How do you work with depression, and how often would we meet?
- What would you expect to change in the first month?
- How do you handle a session when I am in crisis?
- What are your fees, and do you provide superbills for out-of-network claims?

For general education only, not a substitute for therapy, diagnosis, or medical care. These prompts are optional. Stop if completing them increases distress and seek appropriate support. This sheet is not monitored; keep completed notes private. If you are in crisis, call or text 988. If you are in immediate danger, call 911.