The roots of your depression

What causes depression?

The answer to that question is complex because there are many causes, and many types, of depression. (Because of this diversity, it is most accurate to call these illnesses “depressions,” just as we refer to “infections” or “cancers.”)

Identifying the source and nature of a depression may influence which response will be most useful. The major roots of depression are:

LIFE EVENTS: In some cases, depression is triggered by a bad situation such as loss of a loved one, social rejection, or inability to achieve a goal. Of course, stressful situations are a normal part of life, and symptoms of depression may also be considered normal if those symptoms are mild enough and resolve quickly enough. If the depression is persistent or severe, then interventions such as increased social support, psychotherapy, or medication may be helpful.

NEGATIVE PERCEPTION: In other cases, depression arises because an individual appraises a situation as bad, even though others may not see it that way. For example, some people are very sensitive to criticism from others, or have very high expectations of themselves, or feel trapped in their jobs. For many of these individuals, psychotherapy can help by adjusting one's interpretation or outlook on the situation.

NEUROLOGICAL PROCESSES: Depression may also be caused by a problem with how the brain functions. The ways a brain can go wrong are many. For example, depression can be triggered by brain injury, certain medications, alcohol or drugs, a heart attack, or chronic pain. For many individuals, especially those who have experienced multiple episodes of depression in the past, depression can come “out of the blue.” Medications and brain stimulation therapies often can help when a mood disorder arises from brain function.

The various causes of depression are not mutually exclusive. Life is complicated. Bad situations can occur together with poor brain function. For that reason, many people do best when the depression is treated with multiple approaches simultaneously.

Why does depression happen to some people and not others?

Depression is quite common, but most people never experience it, even in the face of adversity. On the other end of the spectrum, some people experience severe depressions, even under the best of circumstances. Why is that?

Individual differences are the result of two kinds of variation: genetic and environmental.

All people carry the same genes, but many of those genes exist in multiple forms (variants) in different people. Some gene variations are immediately apparent because they give rise to differences in height, skin color, or hair type. Other less obvious gene variants affect the way the brain functions. These genetically based differences in brain function are thought to predispose some individuals to depression.

The other major source of variation is a person’s environment, which includes childhood experiences, physical and emotional trauma, social supports, and stressful life events. Severe abuse during childhood, for instance, is strongly linked with depression later in life. Childhood adversity can change how a person perceives the world, and how their brain functions.

Genes and environment interact in complex ways that we are only beginning to understand. For example, some gene variants increase the risk of depression only in the context of stressful life events. This observation highlights the idea that, while you may be stuck with the genes you inherited, genes are not destiny when it comes to depression.

Individual differences in genes and experiences predispose us to some illnesses and protect us from others. Some of us develop depression, others diabetes or heart disease. Our human capacities to recognize, accept, and act on our own behalf are our greatest strengths in coping when illness strikes.

Have a question for the doctor? Email mailbag@hopetocope.com.