

# Depression

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Many of us feel depressed at one time or another, but for some, depression may be chronic and even debilitating.

Emotions are a normal part of our life. We all experience anger, sadness, worry or fear on occasion and it does not lead to disease. It only leads to health problems when emotions are excessive or repressed for long periods of time.

Emotional stress will tend to weaken your "Qi", or energy, or your Qi can stagnate or move in the wrong direction.

Depression can also start from a physical source. For example, insomnia, working too much, or a chronic illness can weaken your Qi, resulting in being upset easily or out of proportion to the situation. A weakened digestive system or lack of proper fluids can cause the quality or quantity of blood to be poor, resulting in depression. A lack of exercise easily leads to Qi stagnation and depression.

Long-standing depression may be due to repressed anger or resentment. In Chinese Medicine, this most commonly affects the Qi of the Liver, causing it to stagnate. Aside from depression, other symptoms of Liver Qi Stagnation may be irritability, "snapping" easily, and intense feelings of frustration and impatience. Physical symptoms of Liver Qi Stagnation may include distention under the rib cage, stomach area, or abdomen, belching, sighing, nausea, moodiness, a feeling of a lump in the throat, and pre-menstrual irritability and breast tenderness. If the Qi of the Lungs or Heart has stagnated, symptoms may include weeping and sadness, and you may be easily affected by the problems of people around you.

Though usually in the early stages of depression only the Qi of various organs is affected, eventually this leads to other problems such as formation of dampness, phlegm, blood stagnation, or heat. This causes further stagnation and can lead to a vicious cycle. Liver Qi Stagnation can disrupt the functioning of the digestive system and lead to weight gain, even if you are eating normal amounts.

From a Chinese Medicine perspective, your practitioner will want to know if your depression improves with rest, or is worse with stressful situations. Once they have determined whether the cause is primarily Qi deficiency or Qi stagnation, they will then determine which organ system is involved. Treatment may focus, for example, on tonifying the Qi of your kidneys, or moving the stagnate Qi of your liver. Most people should notice some improvement almost immediately. The speed of recovery will depend in part on your circumstances and your willingness to follow your practitioner's advice. For many people, acupuncture and herbs can help a great deal in a short period of time.

Often the drugs given to treat depression cause further stagnation and accumulation of dampness, perpetuating the underlying physical cause. Western drugs can be an important part of the treatment, especially if there is a danger the patient will possibly harm themselves or others, or if it makes it possible for the patient to function enough to seek additional means of help. It is extremely important to address the underlying problem, whether through acupuncture, herbs, counseling, light therapy, nutrition, exercise, or a combination of treatments. Never abruptly stop your prescription, and only reduce it gradually with the supervision of your Western health care provider. If you decide to take herbs or amino acids, make sure they are compatible with your medications.

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## Depression, continued

For mild cases of depression, there are many things you can try yourself. If anger has caused stagnation, it may be helpful to express the anger. Sometimes it is wise to first seek the assistance of an impartial third party. If your depression is seasonal with the shorter fall and winter days, try taking walks outside on your breaks during daylight hours. Many find special lights for Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) helpful.

If your depression results from lack of energy, mild exercise is best, and will increase your energy gradually. If stagnation is the problem, moderate exercise will be beneficial. Avoid alcohol, marijuana, and coffee since they cause Qi to stagnate. Eating a balanced diet with nutritious foods and drinking at least two quarts of water per day can be very helpful. Getting adequate rest and planning fun activities can elevate your mood.

Above all, if you are moderately to severely depressed, please see a health care professional to assess the cause of depression and get help. Even though the low energy associated with depression in itself may make it difficult to seek assistance, any amount of help you receive will give you a little more energy to break the depression cycle.

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