

Why do people get depression, anxiety, or bipolar?

There is no single cause. Many factors play a role including genetics, environment, life events, medical conditions, and the way people react to things that happen in their lives.

Genetics

Research shows that mental illness runs in families and that some people inherit genes that make it more likely for them to get depressed. Not everyone who has the genetic makeup for depression, anxiety, or bipolar will get it, though. And many people who have no family history of depression have the condition. So although genes are one factor, they aren't the single cause of mental illness.

Life Events

Life events can be emotionally challenging enough that a person becomes mentally ill.

- Death of a loved one
- Parents' divorce
- moving
- academic demands
- relationship issues
- financial stress

Family and Social Environment

For some, a negative, stressful, or unhappy family atmosphere can affect their self-esteem and lead to depression. Substance use and abuse also can cause chemical changes in the brain that affect mood — alcohol and some drugs are known to have depressant effects. The negative social and personal consequences of substance abuse also can lead to severe unhappiness and depression.

Medical Conditions

Certain medical conditions can affect hormone balance and therefore have an effect on mood. Some conditions, such as hypothyroidism, are known to cause a depressed mood in some people. When these medical conditions are diagnosed and treated by a doctor, the depression usually disappears. For some, undiagnosed learning disabilities might block school success, hormonal changes might affect mood, or physical illness might present challenges or setbacks.

What Happens in the Brain When Someone Is Depressed?

Depression involves the brain's delicate chemistry — specifically, it involves chemicals called **neurotransmitters**. These chemicals help send messages between nerve cells in the brain. Certain neurotransmitters regulate mood, and if they run low, people can become depressed, anxious, and stressed. Stress also can affect the balance of neurotransmitters and lead to depression.

Sometimes, a person may experience depression without being able to point to any particular sad or stressful event. People who have a genetic predisposition to depression may be more prone to the imbalance of neurotransmitter activity that is part of depression.