

Q: I suffer from depression and when I'm at my worst I might have a week or two with very little care for my teeth. Can this interruption in my dental hygiene be damaging?

A: Unfortunately, yes. If uninterrupted by a toothbrush and dental floss, the bacterial make-up of plaque gets scarier by the day. Depending on your age and other health compromises you might experience periodontal (gum and bone) deterioration and active infection. Stress, which can stimulate depression, is an additional load on your immune system and can hasten the breakdown. Also, accumulated plaque will increase your risk of caries (dental decay).

In private new-patient consultations I have been present with SO many who suffer from clinical depression, representing approximately 32 million Americans. Sadly, it often goes undiagnosed/untreated—a disease that claims a higher rate of death than breast cancer! It seems that our culture largely views mental illness as character weakness. Unfortunately, the personal shame that results often serves as a barrier for getting help. Has our ignorance blinded us? I'd like to see us *normalize* the illness of depression among other human illnesses. So how can we help?

First, if we learn the symptoms we will be better able to recognize depression in a close family member or friend. These include: change in sleep patterns, change in weight, irritability, loss of interest in favorite activities, prolonged sadness and as you mentioned diminished self care (including personal hygiene).

Next, we can choose to think about depression as a brain-chemistry illness, not a personal flaw. It has a lot to do with, serotonin and norepinephrine . While there is variable effectiveness among antidepressant medications, it seems to be a matter of matching the right pill with the right person. Many patients experience tremendous relief with few side effects.

Current studies indicate that the most effective treatment today is a combination of antidepressants *and* cognitive behavior therapy, whereby the patient learns to think differently about his circumstances.

Lastly, a call to action: Talk about it openly. If this discussion reminds you of someone you love, have the courage to begin a conversation about depression. You may just be saving a life.