DEFENSE CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE
For Psychological Health & Traumatic Brain Injury

Treatments for Major Depressive Disorder (MDD)

Major depressive disorder (MDD), also referred to as depression, is a medical condition that affects a person's thoughts, feelings and behaviors. There are many treatments available; however, the most common treatments are psychotherapy and/or medication. Psychotherapy is a treatment in which people work with trained behavioral health providers to discuss their problems and learn new skills. While there are a variety of psychotherapies available to treat symptoms of MDD, some have been proven to be more effective than others. There are also several medications that have been proven to be effective in treating MDD. This handout provides basic information on treatments recommended as most effective by the VA/DoD clinical practice guideline for MDD.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a structured, short-term therapy based on the theory that depression is caused by certain patterns of thinking and behaviors. During CBT, your therapist will help you recognize unhealthy thinking patterns and change them in a structured way, a process that is referred to as cognitive restructuring. Your therapist may also teach you relaxation techniques, ways to increase activities you used to do before becoming depressed and other skills to help you cope with negative feelings. An integral part of CBT is homework assignments, which are usually given at the end of each session. The purpose of the homework is to help increase a person's activity levels, monitor thoughts and mood and practice interpersonal skills learned during CBT sessions.

How much time does it take?

A usual course of CBT for depression lasts 16 to 20 sessions or less, depending on the severity of the depression.

Who does this therapy?

This type of therapy should be conducted by a trained provider and is usually available at behavioral health clinics.

Who does it work for?

CBT has been proven to be an effective treatment in adults with MDD.

Interpersonal Therapy (IPT)

Interpersonal Therapy (IPT) is a short-term therapy which is based on the idea that some people experience depression because of problematic relationships. The goal of IPT is to help you identify and solve current interpersonal problems, such as relationships with your family, friends and/or co-workers. During IPT, your therapist will help improve your communication and problem solving skills as well as your ability to appropriately respond to situations that tend to result in feelings of depression. By improving your communication skills, you will be able to resolve conflicts faster and improve your relationships with others.

How much time does it take?

A usual course of IPT lasts 16 to 20 sessions.

Who does this therapy?

This type of therapy should be conducted by a trained mental health provider and is usually available at behavioral health clinics.

Who does it work for?

IPT has been proven to be an effective treatment in adults with mild to moderate MDD.

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Evidence-Based Treatments

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
- Interpersonal Therapy (IPT)
- Problem Solving Therapy (PST)
- Anti-Depressant Medications (ADM)

Problem Solving Therapy (PST)

Problem Solving Therapy (PST) is a newer approach to treating MDD, which is based on the theory that depression can be caused in part by problems in a person's life stacking up and leading them to feel overwhelmed. In PST, you and your provider work through a step-by-step process to define what problems you are currently facing and to learn and apply structured problem-solving techniques. By learning and applying these techniques, you will gain a sense of control over your problems and see a decrease in your levels of depression. Additionally, by the end of PST, you will have the tools necessary to problem solve on your own when future problems occur.

How much time does it take?

A usual course of PST lasts about four to six sessions, usually delivered in three months.

Who does this therapy?

PST has been used most frequently in primary care settings and can be delivered by primary care managers or nurses who have training in the therapy.

Who does it work for?

PST has been proven to be an effective treatment in adults with mild to moderate MDD.

Anti-depressant Medications (ADM)

Anti-depressant medications are thought to correct chemical imbalances in the brain that occur when a person is depressed. There are many types of anti-depressants which have been shown to improve depression, with Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) and Serotonin & Norepinephrine Reuptake Inhibitors (SNRIs) being recommended as first-line medications for MDD in the VA/DoD clinical practice guidelines. These types of medications are popular in the treatment of depression as they are effective in relieving symptoms and have few side effects. Although ADM are not addictive, they should not be stopped suddenly because this can cause a person to have a range of side effects such as headaches and nausea.

How much time does it take?

Medications require two to four weeks to take effect and should be taken for four to nine months after resolution of depression.

Who prescribes ADM?

Anti-depressants can be prescribed by your primary care manager or by a psychiatrist in a behavioral health clinic.

Who does it work for?

Antidepressants are an effective treatment in adults with MDD.

References

Department of Veterans Affairs & Department of Defense (2010). VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guidelines for the Management of Major Depressive Disorder. Retrieved from http://www.healthquality.va.gov/MDD_FULL_3c.pdf

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