

Piercey Neurology LLC

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Dysthymic Disorder: When Depression Lingers

What is dysthymic disorder?

Dysthymic disorder, or dysthymia, is a type of depression that lasts for at least 2 years. Some people suffer from dysthymia for many years. Their depression is usually mild or moderate, rather than severe. Most people who have dysthymia can't tell for sure when they first became depressed.

Symptoms of dysthymic disorder include a poor appetite or overeating, difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much, low energy, fatigue and feelings of hopelessness. People who have dysthymic disorder may have periods of normal mood that last up to 2 months. Family members and friends may not even know that their loved one is depressed. Even though this type of depression is mild, it may make it difficult for a person to function at home, school or work.

How common is dysthymic disorder?

Dysthymic disorder is a fairly common type of depression. It is estimated that up to 4% of people have dysthymia. Dysthymia can begin in childhood or in adulthood. No one knows why, but like most types of depression, it appears to be more common in women.

What causes dysthymic disorder?

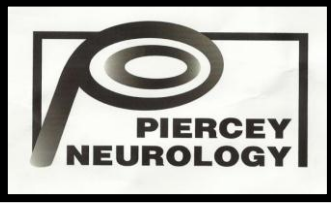
No one knows for sure what causes dysthymia. It may be related to some changes in the brain that involve a chemical called serotonin (say: seer-uh-tone-in). Serotonin helps your brain handle emotions and make judgments. Other medical problems and ongoing life stress may also play a role.

How is dysthymic disorder diagnosed?

If you think you have dysthymia, discuss your concerns with your doctor. Your doctor will ask you questions to find out if you have depression and, if so, to identify the type of depression you have. Your doctor may ask you questions about your health and your symptoms, such as how well you're sleeping, if you feel tired a lot, and if you have trouble concentrating. Your doctor will also consider medical reasons that may cause you to feel depressed, such as problems with your thyroid or a certain medicine you may be taking.

What is the treatment for dysthymic disorder?

Dysthymic disorder can be treated with an antidepressant medicine. This type of drug helps relieve depression. Antidepressants don't cause people to feel "high," and they are not habit-forming.



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It may take a number of weeks, or even several months, before you and your doctor know whether an antidepressant is helping you. It is important for you to take the medicine exactly as your doctor tells you. If the antidepressant helps you feel better, you may need to take this medicine for several years. You should continue to take the medicine, even if you begin to feel better. If you stop taking the medicine, you may get depressed again.

Sometimes there are side effects from stopping antidepressant medicine suddenly. If you want to stop taking your medicine, talk to your doctor first. Your doctor can help you avoid side effects from [stopping your medicine too quickly](#).

Should I see a counselor too?

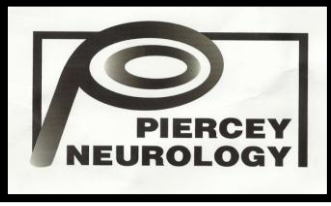
Sometimes, in addition to taking an antidepressant, patients find that counseling can help them deal with specific problems.

Many doctors believe that combining therapy with medication is the most effective way to treat dysthymia.

What can I do to help myself feel better?

Talking to your doctor about how you're feeling and getting treatment for dysthymic disorder are the first steps to feeling better. The following may also help.

- Find activities that make you feel good or help you feel a sense of accomplishment. For example, go to a movie, take a drive on a pleasant day, go to a ball game or work in the garden. Doing something nice for someone else can also help.
- Eat regular, well-balanced, healthy meals.
- Avoid abusing drugs and alcohol. They can make depression worse.
- Get regular exercise. Exercise can improve your mood. Exercising 4 to 6 times a week for 30 to 60 minutes each time is a good goal.



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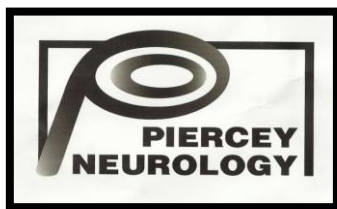
HOW TO BE HAPPY

So happiness - isn't that the thing that all of us strive to find and keep? Nobody is [happy](#) all of the time, but some people are definitely more fulfilled than others. Studies on what makes people happy reveal that it doesn't have much to do with material goods or high achievement; it seems to whittle down to your outlook on life, and the quality of your relationships with the people around you.

[Be optimistic.](#) In the 1970s, researchers followed people who'd won the lottery and found that a year after they'd hit the jackpot, they were no happier than the people who didn't. They called it "hedonic adaptation", which suggests that we each have a baseline level of happiness. No matter what happens, good or bad, the effect on our happiness is only temporary and we tend to rebound to our baseline level. Some people have a higher baseline happiness level than others, and that can be attributed in part to genetics, but it's also largely influenced by "how you think".^[1] So while the remainder of this article will help boost your happiness, only improving your attitude towards life will increase your happiness permanently. Here are some excellent starting points for doing that:

[Follow your gut.](#) In one study, two groups of people were asked to pick out a poster to take home. One group was asked to analyze their decision carefully, weighing the pros and cons, and the other group was told to listen to their gut. Two weeks later, the group that followed their gut was happier with their posters than the group that analyzed their decisions.^[2] Now, some of our decisions are more crucial than picking out posters, but by the time you're pouring over your choice, the options you're weighing are probably very similar, and the difference will only temporarily affect your happiness. So next time you have a decision to make, and you're down to two or three options, just pick the one that feels right, and go with it. Never regret the decisions you make though. Just live by the 3 C's of life: choices chances, and changes. You need to make a choice to take a chance or your life will never change.

[Make enough money to meet your basic needs:](#) food, shelter, and clothing. In the US, that magic number is \$40,000 a year. Any money you make beyond that will not necessarily make you happier. Remember the lottery winners mentioned earlier? Oodles of money didn't make them any happier. Once you make enough money to support your basic needs, your happiness is not significantly affected by how much money you make, but by your level of optimism.^[3] Your *comfort* may increase with your salary, but comfort isn't what makes people happy. It makes people bored. That's why it's important to [push beyond your comfort zone](#) to fuel your growth as a person.



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Stay close to friends and family. Or move to where other members are- so you can see them more. We live in a mobile society, where people follow jobs around the country and sometimes around the world. We do this because we think increases in salary will make us happier, but the fact is that our relationships with our friends and family have a far greater impact on our happiness than our jobs do. So next time you think about relocating, consider that you'd need a salary increase of over \$100,000 USD to compensate for the loss of happiness you'd have from moving away from your friends and family.^[4] But if your relationships with your family and friends are unhealthy or nonexistent, and you are bent on moving, choose a location where you'll be making about the same amount of money as everyone else; according to research, people feel more financially secure (and happier) when they're on similar financial footing as the people around them, regardless of what that footing is.^[5]

Find happiness in the job you have *now*. Many people expect the right job or the right career to dramatically change their level of happiness, but happiness research makes it clear that your level of optimism and the quality of your relationships eclipse the satisfaction you gain from your job.^[6] If you have a positive outlook, you will make the best of any job, and if you have good relationships with people, you won't depend on your job to give your life a greater sense of meaning. You'll find it in your interactions with the people you care about. Now that doesn't mean you shouldn't aspire towards a job that will make you happier; it means you should understand that the capacity of your job to make you happy is quite small in comparison to your outlook on life and your relationships with people.

Smile. Science suggests that when you smile, whether you feel happy or not, your mood will be elevated. So smile all the time!^[7] In addition having enough money to pay the bills allows you to focus your energies on more productive aspects of your life, such as the pursuit of happiness as opposed to keeping the 'wolves from the door'.

Forgive. In a study of college students, it was found that an attitude of forgiveness contributed to better cardiovascular health. You could say that forgiveness literally heals your heart. While it is unknown how forgiveness directly affects your heart, the study suggests that it may lower the perception of stress.^[8]
