

# Am I Sleep Deprived & Tired or Depressed?

**Dr. Alex Dimitriu with Menlo Park Psychiatry & Sleep Medicine offers tips on understanding the difference and what to do about each**

Sleep-deprived? It's common sense that being fatigued generally leaves us in a foul mood. But how can we tell when we're sleep-deprived and merely tired – or if we're actually depressed? Psychiatrist and sleep specialist Alex Dimitriu, MD, founder of Menlo Park Psychiatry & Sleep Medicine, frequently speaks to curious patients about this issue. Since exhaustion, irritability, lack of motivation, anxiety and tearfulness are all symptoms of sleep deprivation – and also symptoms of depression – there's a great deal of confusion on the matter, he says.

Trouble sleeping is often the first symptom of depression, which affects nearly 7% of the American population in any given year. And according to Harvard Health, research has shown that 15% to 20% of those diagnosed with insomnia – which is the inability to fall or stay asleep – will develop major depression.

“When we're exhausted we feel low, but depression can also lead to exhaustion,” Dr. Dimitriu explains. “This chicken-egg dilemma makes it difficult to know what came first – the sleep debt or the low mood that leads to sleep deprivation. Fortunately, there are ways to tell the two apart.”

## How symptoms differ

To begin to discern depression from sleep deprivation, it's important to understand the symptoms of both, says Dr. Dimitriu, who is dual board-certified in psychiatry and sleep medicine. Enduring an ongoing sleep debt – meaning a certain amount of lost sleep each night – typically translates into daytime sleepiness. But other symptoms can include:

- Excessive yawning
- Forgetfulness
- Clumsiness
- Feeling “fuzzy” or unfocused
- Greater appetite
- Dulled sex drive
- Irritability

On the other hand, symptoms of depression often involve:

- Consistent trouble sleeping, or sleeping too much
- Significant weight loss or gain
- Agitation
- Feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt
- Trouble thinking, concentrating or making decisions
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide

“Depressed mood is certainly part of both these scenarios, but depression typically involves dramatic emotional symptoms as well,” Dr. Dimitriu says. “The weight of all this can make it hard to function or even get out of bed.”

“A few distinguishing features which help in my practice include asking people whether their motivation is intact,” adds Dr. Dimitriu. Often, sleepy people will express interest or a desire to do things but may feel they lack the energy to do them. On the other hand, depressed people often lack the desire to do things altogether. Energy levels in the afternoon are another indicator of fatigue. While it's not uncommon to get a little drowsy after lunch, and irresistible desire for sleep, may sometimes point to more of a sleep, rather than a mood problem.

## Telling them apart

So, when sleep deprivation is at play, what's the main way to tell depression apart from just being tired? Dr. Dimitriu says it comes down to duration.

“Essentially, depression is characterized by a time period of two weeks or longer of depressed mood or loss of interest or pleasure in nearly everything you do,” he says. “It's profound and doesn't let up after a few days.”

Clearly, we should try to pinpoint the causes of fatigue and low mood whenever they occur, he adds. If you have a sleep debt, that could mean you shouldn't drive a car or operate machinery until you've caught up on sleep.

And if your low mood, emotional symptoms and lack of motivation indicate depression, you should promptly see your health care provider for treatment, he advises. “So many effective therapies are available to help with depression,” Dr. Dimitriu adds. “But seek immediate help. If you or a loved one experiences suicidal thoughts.”

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