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[Depression Facts](#)
[Graphics](#)

Depression Survey Reveals Dramatic Change in Public Opinion: Disease or State of Mind?

Key Findings

The general public is becoming better informed about depression.

- In 1991, only 38 percent of people polled believed depression was a disease.[1] On NMHA's 2001 survey, fully 55 percent of those polled understand that depression is an illness.
- Almost one half of the 2001 participants report having a family member (16 percent), a close friend (12 percent) or both (20 percent) who has been diagnosed with depression.
- A majority (57 percent) accurately believe that proper treatment will allow a depressed person to "at best, manage and control their symptoms."

People with depression say "you can control it, but you cannot get rid of it..."

- Fully 76 percent of people with depression believe they will probably need some kind of treatment throughout the rest of their lives.
- More than half (53 percent) have been treated for depression on multiple occasions. They report having experienced a median number of five separate bouts or episodes of depression.
- People with depression recognize that treatment works and that there is a hope of feeling better. Sixty-six percent said that continuing medication would be "very effective" in preventing a return of symptoms and 62 percent of those currently using therapy rate it as "very effective."

Even though treatment works, some people have trouble staying with it.

- Among people currently in treatment, nearly one-third (29 percent) report skipping medication doses during the week and almost one-fourth (24 percent) have difficulty attending regular psychotherapy sessions.
- Health care providers polled believe those they treat have difficulty staying with their medication and psychotherapy regimens at the rate of 40 percent and 52 percent, respectively. Seventy percent of physicians said patients might find adherence easier if they had to take medication less often.

The "human costs" of depression appear to be significant.

- Depression and divorce may be correlated. Fifteen percent of those with depression said they are divorced. The divorce rate for the general public respondents is only 10 percent.
- Unemployment also is more prevalent among the depressed. Twenty-three percent of this group are

not working compared with only six percent of the general public sample.

- People experiencing recurrences of depression have a worse socio-economic profile. Among those who've experienced more than six bouts of depression, 73 percent report household incomes of less than \$50K per year, compared to 54 percent of those experiencing fewer than two episodes since diagnosis.
- With almost one-third of respondents (31 percent) in the general public sample saying they believe depression is a "state of mind you can snap out of," people with depression may be misunderstood and stigmatized.

Survey Design

- The findings from this survey are based on telephone interviews with three groups: 500 adults ages 21-70 currently being treated for depression; 300 health care providers who treat people with depression (100 each of primary care physicians, psychiatrists and psychologists) and 800 adults over age 18.
- The margin of error for each sample segment was: people with depression = ± 4.38 percent; healthcare providers = ± 5.66 percent; general public = ± 3.46 percent.

This survey was conducted on behalf of the National Mental Health Association by Public Opinion Strategies and made possible through an unrestricted educational grant from Eli Lilly and Company. Contact Chamberlain Communications Group, 212-732-6111, Kelly Connor (x202) or Kara Golub (x210)

[1] 1991, Princeton Research Associates