CAUSES OF DEPRESSION

There is no single cause for depression

- Genetic – A biological vulnerability to depression and bipolar disorder seem to be inherited. With bipolar disorder, studies of families in which members of each generation develop bipolar disorders found that those with the illness have a somewhat different genetic makeup than those who do not get ill. However, the reverse is not true: Not everybody with the genetic makeup that causes vulnerability to bipolar disorder will have the illness. Studies of major depression also have shown higher incidences among those with close relatives who have experienced major depression. Research has revealed that depression runs in families and suggests that some people inherit genes that make it more likely for them to get depressed. And many people who have no family history of depression have the condition. So, although genes are one factor, they aren't the single cause of depression.

- Biological – Whether inherited or not, major depressive disorder and bipolar disorder are associated with changes in brain structures or brain function. Depression involves the brain's delicate chemistry. It involves chemicals called neurotransmitters that assist in transmitting messages between nerve cells in the brain. Certain neurotransmitters regulate mood. When they are not available in sufficient quantities, the result can be depression. Neurotransmitters that have been linked to depression are serotonin, nonrepinephrine, dopamine, acetylcholine, and gamma-aminobutyric acid. Other research has found EEG abnormalities and hormonal system irregularities are linked to depression. Recently, the National Institute of Mental Health has linked over-activity in emotion regulating circuitry in the midbrain area to depression.

- Environmental – Individuals who have experienced high levels of stressful life events are more vulnerable to depression. A serious loss, relationship problems, financial difficulties, job difficulties, and family problems are examples of life stressors that may trigger a depressive episode.

- Cognitive – Individuals who view themselves and their world with pessimism and negativity are more vulnerable to depression.

- In recent years, researchers have shown the physical changes in the body can be accompanied by mental changes as well. Medical illnesses such as a stroke, a heart attack, cancer, and hormonal disorders can cause depressive illness, making a sick person apathetic and unwilling to care for his or her physical needs.

- Genetic, biological, environmental, or cognitive factors may work in combination to produce depression.

- Scientists are learning about the possible causes of bipolar disorder through several kinds of studies. Most scientists now agree that there is no single cause for bipolar disorder – rather, many factors act together to produce the illness. Because bipolar disorder tends to run in families, researchers have been searching for specific genes. But genes are not the whole story. Studies of identical twins, who share all the same genes, indicate that both genes and other factors play a role in bipolar disorder. If bipolar disorder were caused entirely by genes, then the identical twin of someone with the illness would always develop the illness, and research has shown that this is not the case. But if one twin has bipolar disorder, the other twin is more likely to develop the illness than is another sibling. In addition, findings from gene research suggest that bipolar disorder, like other mental illnesses, does not occur because of a single gene. It appears likely that many different genes act together, and in combination with other factors of the person or the person's environment, to cause bipolar disorder. Finding these genes, each of which contributes only a small amount toward the vulnerability to bipolar disorder, has been extremely difficult.