



## Depression in Former Professional Football Players

Depression is a common and serious health problem that affects millions of Americans every year. It is not just feeling sad, “blue,” discouraged, irritable, or “down.” **Depression is an illness that affects the whole person – their thoughts, feelings, behavior, and physical health.**

Symptoms of depression can include:

- Sadness
- Hopelessness
- Emptiness
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Tearfulness
- Changes in Appetite
- Changes in Sleeping Patterns
- Fatigue/Decreased Energy
- Aches/Pains/ Other physical symptoms
- Mood Swings
- Decreased Interest in People
- Decreased Interest in Activities (including sex)
- Social Withdrawal
- Reckless Behavior
- Feelings of Guilt
- Feelings of Worthlessness
- Feelings of Shame
- Problems with Making Decisions
- Problems with Concentration
- Problems with Memory
- Slowed Thinking
- Thoughts of Death & Dying
- Thoughts of Suicide

**Everyone** experiences SOME of the above symptoms some of the time. However, when someone is depressed, they experience **many** of these symptoms **most of the day, every day, for days or weeks at a time.**

About 12% of all men are expected to have at least one significant episode of depression in their lifetime, and there is growing evidence that **former professional football players may be at increased risk for depression.**

### Real Life: Causes of Depression

- Depression is a real illness with real causes—it is not caused by laziness or lack of will power.
- Causes include heredity, chronic pain or chronic illness, and stressful life experiences.
- **Many retired football players have had particular difficulty with the transition to “life after football.”** Their sense of identity may have been based upon their role as a professional player, and many have trouble figuring out who they are or what they are supposed to do after they retire.

## Depression & Retired Football Players

- Some studies that have found that **retired football players are likely to experience more symptoms of depression** than men who did NOT play football. Concussions may also increase risk. There certainly is no reason to think that former football players are at LESS risk for depression than other men. **Many factors that are known to be associated with depression in general -- like sleep disorders, chronic pain, substance abuse, and a history of traumatic brain injury – ARE more common in former players.**

## What do I do about depression?

- Depression is very treatable, but many men don't get help because they are embarrassed, blame themselves, feel admitting to difficulties means they are weak or not "manly," or are concerned with being labelled. Some men don't even recognize that what they are feeling is depression
- **Retired football players may be even MORE reluctant to acknowledge that they are feeling bad or having difficulty managing what they feel, partly due to the culture of football.**
- Getting help NOW can help you avoid more serious illness down the road, and can decrease your risk for cognitive decline, dementia, and self-harm.

## Treatment for Depression

Treatments for depression can include:

- **Medications** are used to treat depression work by improving the brain's ability to make use of "neurotransmitters" that naturally occur in the brain. They aren't "happy pills" or tranquilizers. They don't elevate mood by changing your personality or making you lose touch with reality, and they are not habit-forming. They help you to feel like yourself again, and to feel more able to cope with whatever life brings you. While they may have initial side effects, those side effects usually wear off in a matter of days or weeks.
- **Counseling/psychotherapy** helps people learn to cope and to understand factors that may be contributing to their depression. Cognitive-behavioral therapies focus on helping men identify and change attitudes, ways of thinking, and behaviors that contribute to their depression. A good therapist is like a "trainer" for your brain. The "trainer's" goal is to help you achieve the best possible mental health you can.
- **Lifestyle changes** like getting regular aerobic exercise, improving sleep habits or getting a sleep disorder treated, cutting down on alcohol use, or forcing yourself to get back into the habit of spending time with friends or engaging in pleasurable activities can make a big difference in your mood.

## Getting Help

- The first step toward getting help is to be evaluated by a doctor or other mental health professional who can help you come up with a plan to treat your depression.
- **The Trust has made arrangements with Cigna to ensure that ALL retired professional football players, whether they have insurance or not, can have up to 6 counseling sessions free of charge.**

- If your depression is so bad that you are thinking about suicide, don't wait around hoping to feel better. Go to your local emergency room.

**For more information:**

- **NIMH handout on Men and Depression:**  
[http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/men-and-depression/men-depression-508\\_In.pdf](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/men-and-depression/men-depression-508_In.pdf)
- Didehbani, N., Cullum, C. M., Mansinghani, S., Conover, H., & Hart, J. (2013). **Depressive symptoms and concussions in aging retired NFL players.** *Archives of clinical neuropsychology*, 28(5), 418-424.
- **University of Michigan- Depression Center:**  
<http://www.depressioncenter.org/education-outreach/programs/professional-athlete-evaluation/>

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- American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (4th ed., text rev.)*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Guskiewicz, K. M., Marshall, S. W., Bailes, J., McCrea, M., Harding, H. P., Matthews, A., ... & Cantu, R. C. (2007). Recurrent concussion and risk of depression in retired professional football players. *Medicine and science in sports and exercise*, 39(6), 903.
- [http://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/other-resources/NCODH\\_Depression.pdf](http://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/other-resources/NCODH_Depression.pdf)