

# Overview: Depressive Disorders

When Substance Use Deepens the Pain of Depression

## What Are Depressive Disorders?

**Depressive Disorders** are conditions characterized by persistent sadness, emptiness, or loss of interest that significantly impairs daily functioning. These disorders involve changes in mood, thinking, and physical functioning that last weeks, months, or years. For families, watching a loved one struggle with a hopelessness fueled by substance use is heartbreaking.

## Understanding Depressive Disorders

### Major Depressive Disorder

Persistent sadness and loss of interest lasting at least two weeks, with symptoms severe enough to interfere with work, relationships, and daily activities. It is the most common depressive disorder.

- Persistent sadness, emptiness, or hopelessness that doesn't lift
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed
- Changes in sleep (insomnia or sleeping too much) and appetite

### Persistent Depressive Disorder (Dysthymia)

Chronic, low-grade depression lasting at least two years. The persistence of this disorder makes it difficult to recognize and treat.

- "Low mood" that feels normal because it's been there for years
- Functioning at work or home but never feeling fully satisfied
- Low energy, poor self-esteem, and difficulty making decisions

### Substance/Medication-Induced Depressive Disorder

Develops during or shortly after substance use, intoxication, or withdrawal. This distinction is critical because it determines whether depression will resolve with sobriety or require separate treatment.

- Depressive symptoms that emerge during heavy substance use or withdrawal
- Mood that improves significantly after several weeks of abstinence
- Depression that worsens with each relapse cycle



#### Prevalence:

**8.3%** of U.S. adults<sup>1</sup>

#### Co-Occurrence:

**2x** more likely to develop a substance use disorder<sup>2</sup>

#### Treatment Gap:

**1 in 3**

Patients with major depressive disorder also have a substance use disorder<sup>3</sup>

Sources: <sup>1</sup> Major Depression, National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH).

<sup>2</sup> National Comorbidity Survey Replication (NCS-R), PMC. <sup>3</sup> Major Depression and Comorbid Substance Use Disorders (Davis et al., 2008), PubMed

## How Depressive Disorders Contribute to Relapse

Depression and addiction share overlapping brain pathways, making their relationship uniquely destructive. Substances temporarily activate the same reward systems that depression has dampened—creating powerful relief that reinforces continued use.

- 1) Substances Provide Temporary Escape**  
The relief of substance use makes them feel essential.
- 2) Depression Drains Motivation for Recovery**  
Hopelessness and fatigue challenge recovery efforts.
- 3) Without Treating the Disorder, Relapse Is Likely**  
Substances disrupt the brain's natural mood regulation.

*“Depression and addiction affect the same reward pathways in the brain. Treating addiction while ignoring depression is like treating symptoms while ignoring the disease. Both conditions must be addressed together.”*



**Dr. Leslie Secret, MD**  
Medical Director, Burning Tree Ranch

## How Depressive Disorders Are Identified & Diagnosed

- Assessment after adequate abstinence to separate primary depression from withdrawal effects
- History examining whether depression predated substance use or persisted during sobriety
- Evaluation of symptom severity, duration, and functional impairment

## Long-Term Treatment for Depressive Disorders and Addiction

Depression and substance use disorders reinforce each other through shared brain chemistry. Recovery requires time for both conditions to be properly diagnosed, treated, and stabilized. Our **long-term, progress-based model** provides the extended structure needed for genuine healing.

- 1) Time Reveals the True Picture**  
Accurate diagnosis depression requires weeks or months of sobriety.
- 2) Treating Both Conditions Together**  
Relapse is less likely when the underlying depression is treated.
- 3) Measuring Progress by Stability, Not Days**  
Clients advance when they demonstrate sustained emotional regulation and engagement with life.



### Have Other Treatment Programs Missed the Deeper Issues?

Burning Tree Ranch is the Nation's only authentic long-term treatment program for chronic relapse. Call us at (866) 287-2877 or visit us online at [www.BurningTree.com](http://www.BurningTree.com).

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