Depression Can Lead People to Overestimate Aches and Pains

December 3, 2009

People who are depressed are more likely to remember having more physical symptoms than they actually experienced, according to a University of Iowa study published October 15 in *Psychosomatic Medicine*. The results conclude that individuals with depression, as opposed to neuroticism, recall experiences differently, tending to ruminate over and exaggerate the bad.

The 109 study participants, all female, completed baseline surveys to assess their levels of depression and neuroticism (negative effects, such as irritability, sadness, anxiety and fear, often associated with mental illness). The women were then asked to keep a daily log for three weeks, noting how often they experienced aches and pains, gastrointestinal problems and upper-respiratory issues. At the end of the three weeks, the study participants were asked to estimate how often they had experienced those physical symptoms during the previous three weeks.

Researchers found that women who were originally assessed as having more severe depression were also more likely to overestimate the number of days on which they'd experienced physical symptoms.

The study also found that people high in neuroticism, but low in depression, were not likely to misremember symptoms—debunking a long-standing theory that neuroticism is behind inflated reports of symptoms.

"Depressed individuals and their physicians shouldn't discount common symptoms because they can indicate serious problems," said Jerry Suls, a psychologist involved in the study. "However, since we now know that depressed individuals tend to over-remember the frequency of symptoms, it wouldn't hurt to encourage patients to write down their symptoms as they're happening. That way the patient and doctor have an accurate record of what has been going on, rather than relying on memory."

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.sanemag.com/article/hiv-memory-depression-17675-8239