

Update: Recognizing Risks and Signs of Depression



Recognizing Depression is Key to Treatment

Older adults often get the blues – following the death of a spouse or friend, a troubling health diagnosis, or a drastic change in their living arrangement. Sadness in the face of these life-changing events is normal. But when symptoms linger for more than two weeks, or when a senior feels worthless or pulls away from friends, family and favorite activities, they might have depression.

Depression is common among older people. Approximately two million American seniors suffer from it, and it's twice as common for women as for men. But depression is **not** a normal part of aging, and seniors and their caregivers should not ignore its risks and symptoms.

Causes of depression (or an increased risk of depression) include:

- Family history of depression
- Prolonged grief from the death or loss of a spouse or loved one
- Serious illness or diminishing physical capacity
- Certain medications
- Unwelcome change in living environment
- Reduced sense of purpose, perhaps due to retirement or physical limitations
- Loss of independence, such as no longer being permitted to drive.

Unfortunately, depression is widely under-recognized and under-treated in older adults. Its causes are often overlooked because they coincide with other medical problems such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, Parkinson's, or other chronic health conditions, for which treatment might take precedence in the short term. However, depression can worsen the outcomes of these diseases, so it is important to treat it.

When sadness becomes prolonged, too intense or prevents someone from leading a normal life, or when a senior is no longer interested in their life and activities, it is time to seek treatment.

It is important for caregivers to know the risks and symptoms of depression because a senior may not recognize the symptoms in themselves or may be uncomfortable talking about them.

Symptoms of depression include:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or “empty” mood
- Feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, worthlessness
- Social withdrawal or isolation
- Decreased energy, fatigue, slowed movement
- Increased or unexplained aches and pains
- Restlessness, irritability
- Significant changes in sleeping or eating patterns
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts.

Depression is highly treatable, especially with early intervention, but only one in six seniors with depression gets diagnosed and treated, according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH). There are many options for treatment, including counseling and medication. Lifestyle, diet, exercise or other holistic changes may also be beneficial.

Resources

National Mental Health Association
(Mental Health America)

<http://www.nmha.org>

American Psychological Association

<http://www.apa.org>

National Institute of Mental Health

<http://www.nimh.nih.org>

National Institute of Health's National Institute on Aging

<http://www.nih.gov/nia>

AARP

<http://www.aarp.org>

About My Health Care Manager

My Health Care Manager helps older adults and their families understand and navigate the health issues and complex decisions associated with aging. For more information, contact My Health Care Manager, 8520 Allison Pointe Blvd., Suite 230, Indianapolis, IN 46250, 317-598-8921 or 800-499-8020 or visit us on the Web at www.MyHealthCareManager.com.

Tips for helping someone cope with depression:

There are also many things that seniors can do for themselves to avoid or combat depression. Encourage your loved one to:

- Get out into the world
- Connect to others – socialize in person or via phone or email
- Participate in activities they enjoy
- Volunteer – helping others helps them feel better about themselves
- Get a pet to keep them company
- Learn a new skill
- Seek out things that make them happy – laughter really is the best medicine
- Maintain a healthy diet – including foods that provide nourishment and energy, along with a daily multivitamin
- Exercise
- Follow doctor's orders, including medications
- Ask for help.

Caregivers Need Care, Too

Living with or caring for a depressed person can be challenging and stressful, making it difficult for a caregiver to take care of their loved one and themselves. NIH research shows that extreme stress can take as much as 10 years off the life of a family caregiver. These tips can help make things easier for caregivers and more beneficial for the depressed person:

- Speak up for yourself. Let your loved one know how you are feeling before emotions get pent up, or talk to a trusted friend.
- Set boundaries to avoid burnout and resentment.
- Make time for yourself and your own needs. Take breaks – it will help both of you.
- Seek out support groups either for depressed seniors or for caregivers.

Caregivers Make a Critical Difference in Managing Depression in Seniors

The support and involvement of family and friends can be crucial in helping someone who is depressed. There are many resources online and in the community that offer guidance and support for caregivers of a senior with depression.

Helping a depressed senior:

- Learn about depression – know the causes and signs. This will help you understand what your loved one is experiencing. Then you can help educate other family and friends.
- Be understanding, but don't underestimate how serious depression is.
- Don't take hostility personally – depression is often expressed by irritability. Remember that this is the depression – not your loved one – talking.
- Make sure your loved one is evaluated and treated by a professional trained in mental health. This is essential to properly diagnose depression and find the right kind of treatment.
- Have realistic expectations and provide constant support. Recovering from depression doesn't happen overnight, and it can be frustrating for you and your loved one when progress is slow. Try to be patient with both the depressed person and their treatment.
- Make sure you notice and genuinely praise any improvement.
- Help your loved one stick to his or her treatment plan – make sure prescribed medications are taken and therapy sessions attended if needed; help him or her make recommended lifestyle changes and encourage them to stay in touch with their health care provider.
- Adopt an interaction style that puts the depressed person in charge. Instead of suggesting, "Let's go to the movies tonight," try "I'd like to see a movie tonight. Which one of these do you want to see with me?"

'This is the nicest gift my children have ever given us'

A My Health Care Manager story

Just a few weeks after David and Gail Holmes sold their home of 35 years, gave away most of their personal belongings, and moved to a senior living apartment, their lives changed dramatically. David began to have memory problems and difficulty managing his medications. He had several hospital emergency admissions as his condition worsened. Gail's whole world seemed to be shifting, and she began to withdraw and slip into depression.

When Gail became unable to help her husband or herself, her children reached out to My Health Care Manager. Their Health Care Manager worked in concert with their physician to create support systems and tools to help Gail and David regain control over their health issues and adapt to their new living environment. She created a Physician Appointment Planner for Gail to help her initiate communications with her primary care physician and establish a new treatment plan. This plan included a calendar of social activities and having Gail join a support group for women coping with similar significant life transitions to help her see that she wasn't alone on her journey.

Their Health Care Manager also counseled Gail, David and their children on the symptoms of depression and that seeking early intervention could prevent other illnesses from worsening, preserving overall well-being and diminishing unnecessary suffering.

"She is like a daughter to us," said Gail. "[My Health Care Manager] is the best gift my children have ever given us."

This information is meant to complement the advice of your health care providers, not replace it. Talk to your doctor if you have any health concerns.

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