

Depression and the Elderly

Overcoming the shades of gray

It's normal for older people to feel sad or discouraged from time to time — especially when a loved one dies or a serious illness is diagnosed. But when feelings of sadness and grief persist over time, it may be a sign of clinical depression.

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) estimates that, of the 35 million Americans aged 65 and older, two million suffer from a depressive illness. Another five million may experience serious depressive symptoms. Depression among the elderly is often overlooked and untreated for a number of reasons. One, many people think depression is simply a normal part of aging (it isn't). Two, it's hard to recognize clinical depression in older people as some symptoms, such as reduced physical activity, sleeping problems and memory difficulty, may appear to be normal age-related changes. Also, most depressed elders tend to deny being depressed, feeling that it may mean they're "weak" or "crazy."

As a caregiver, friend, or family member, you can play a critical role in recognizing signs that an elder may be depressed, as well as helping the person get the support he or she needs.

Looking for signs

Recognizing the possible warning signs of depression is the first step in helping a depressed person. While no two people have the same experience with depression, the most common symptoms include:

- Sad, blue or empty feelings.
- A lack of interest in activities usually enjoyed.
- Appetite and weight changes (loss or gain).
- Neglecting personal appearance, chores, and daily responsibilities.
- Sleep problems (insomnia, oversleeping, or early-morning waking).
- Irritability.
- Withdrawing from friends and family.
- A lack of energy or sense of fatigue.
- Recurring aches and pains that seem to have no physical cause.
- Feelings of worthlessness and helplessness.
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering and making decisions.
- Talking about death or suicide.

Keep in mind that there is no single sign for depression. If you notice the older person experiencing several of these symptoms for two weeks or longer, or if the

person can't seem to manage normal day-to-day activities, it's best to get an evaluation by a doctor or mental health professional.

Helping a depressed elder

Clinical depression can be treated at any age with the many effective medications and treatment strategies available today. If you believe your elder friend or family member may be depressed, one of the most important things you can do is encourage the person to seek help. Remember that many older people tend to not seek help for depression because they believe mental health services are for "crazy people," or they traditionally think that they should be able to "get over it" themselves.

It's important to make the person feel comfortable with accepting help. After all, people don't put themselves down for going to a doctor when they are physically sick. So they shouldn't feel ashamed about seeing a professional for help with depression or other emotional problems.

Express concern for the person and remind him or her that some problems can become too difficult for anyone to deal with alone. Emphasize the fact that professional counselors and therapists know how to help people work through their problems.

If they're hesitant to seek counseling, you can suggest that he or she try at least one session or offer to go with them. You can also recommend that the elder speak with their regular physician. The person may feel more comfortable talking to a doctor with whom they have an existing history, and physicians are capable of prescribing antidepressant medications if necessary.

Finally, you should support whatever decision the elder makes. The person may refuse to seek help at first, and has the right to do so (unless the person's life is at risk; only then should you force the decision). The most important step is to let him or her know that you care and that there are ways to get help. Continue to follow up with further discussions. Don't be critical or apply too much pressure — just let the person know that you are still concerned.

Listening for clues

Conversations may reveal hints of depression. Take note of statements like the following:

"I don't feel like doing anything."

"I am such a burden on everyone."

"No one wants a dreary old man/woman around."

"No matter what I do, I can't do anything right."

"Nobody cares."

“My life is worthless.”

“My family would be better off without me.”

Helping yourself

Dealing with a depressed person can be frustrating. It may be useful to visit a mental health professional yourself for a better understanding of depression, as well as to get advice on how you can best help in this situation. What’s more, seeing a counselor or therapist yourself may encourage your resistant friend or relative to seek help.

Resources

<http://www.nmha.org/ccd/support/older.cfm>

Information on “depression in later life” from the National Mental Health Association.

<http://prevention.liveandworkwell.com>

UBH’s Preventative Health Program Web site features a self-appraisal, educational materials, resource listings and more.

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/depressionmenu.cfm>

Online publications about depression from the National Institute of Mental Health — available in English and Spanish.

<http://www.nami.org>

Information and support listings from the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill.