

Church Name

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DEPRESSION IN OLDER ADULTS

Depression is a fairly common condition in older adults, occurring more frequently in the presence of other health conditions. Isolated older adults with few support systems are at greater risk for depression. The multiple changes and losses older adults experience put them at risk for depression. Because older adults and those associated with them tend to view depression as a normal part of aging and don't consider it to be a real illness, many cases of depression in older adults go unrecognized and untreated. Many older adults are not accustomed to talking about their feelings, are reluctant to ask for help, and feel stigmatized by any suggestion that they may be "mentally ill". They may not even appear sad, but yet may be depressed. Even physicians frequently overlook signs of depression in their focus on physical symptoms. Untreated depression places the older adult at risk for medical conditions, cognitive decline and both suicide and non-suicide mortality.

Depression is not a normal or necessary part of aging. While it is normal and healthy for older adults to experience grief following losses, prolonged sadness and loss of hope is not normal—it is depression.

Causes and risk factors for depression in older adults include:

- Loneliness and isolation: living alone; decreased mobility; loss of driving privileges; dwindling social circle due to deaths or relocations.
- Reduced sense of purpose: results from loss of identity upon retirement or physical limitations on activities.
- Health problems: chronic illnesses; cognitive decline; disability; chronic or severe pain.
- Medications. Many prescription medications can trigger or exacerbate depression. Possibly offending medications include: steroids, painkillers, hormones, arthritis medications, high blood pressure medications, heart disease medications, tranquilizers, and/or cancer drugs.
- Fears and anxieties about health concerns or finances.
- Recent bereavement such as death of spouse, friends, pet, family members.

Signs and symptoms of depression in the older adult:

Older adults do not exhibit the classic signs of depression. It is more typical for depressed older adults to complain of physical problems including unexplained or aggravated aches and pains, a lack of energy, or low motivation. In addition, any of these may be present:

- Sadness (may or may not be present.)
- Hopelessness
- Aggravated anxieties and worries.
- Memory problems.
- Loss of feeling of pleasure and loss of interest in hobbies and/or pleasurable pastimes.
- Slowed movement.

- Irritability; demanding behavior.
- Lack of interest in personal care (skipping meals, forgetting medications, neglecting personal hygiene).
- Fatigue
- Social withdrawal and isolation (both a cause and a result of depression).
- Loss of appetite and weight loss.
- Loss of self-worth; feelings of worthlessness.
- Sleep disturbances
- Increased use of alcohol or other drugs.
- Fixation on death; suicide thoughts or attempts.

Suggestions for helping the depressed older adult:

- If you have any suspicions that the older adult may be depressed, talk about these with the physician; if he/she does not respond to your concerns, request a referral to a mental health professional.
- Invite the older adult out: schedule regular social activities and outings; keep him/her in contact with other people; be insistent if he/she refuses.
- Make sure that the older adult is eating healthy meals.
- Make sure that the older adult takes prescribed anti-depressive medications as ordered and follows through with any prescribed treatment so the depression doesn't recur.
- Be alert for warning signs of suicide. Seek professional help immediately if any occur.

Distinguishing Depression and Dementia:

While depression and dementia can be present simultaneously, depression can look like dementia.

Distinguishing the two is crucial:

- Memory loss:
 - Depressed older adults may have difficulty concentrating and may complain of memory loss, usually with a fairly rapid onset. They may focus on and worry about these complaints and will tend to be negative about their memory problems: "I can't remember anything anymore".
 - The short term memory of older adults with dementia will be affected, but they are more likely to try to cover for memory lapses. The progression of memory loss will be slower.
- Orientation:
 - Depressed older adults will be oriented to time, place, and person.
 - Older adults with dementia may be confused about time, place and person and may get lost in familiar surroundings.
- Language:
 - Depressed older adults will use language properly.
 - Older adults with dementia will have word-finding and other language problems.
- Routine activities:
 - Older adults with dementia may have problems remembering how to perform previously-learned routine activities.
 - Depressed older adults will not forget how to perform these activities.

Depression in older adults, when recognized, is treatable. By keeping alert for warning signs of depression, you can assure that the older adult gets help overcoming this difficult condition.

Reference: www.helpguide.org/mental/depression_elderly.htm