



COPING WITH DEPRESSION IN OLDER ADULTS

Many people think that to be old is to be sad. There are, certainly, a lot of reasons for old folks to be sad. They experience many losses: their youth, jobs, abilities, friends and spouses through death and relocation. To be sad following these losses is **NORMAL** at any age.

But to be deeply sad continuously, unrelentingly, and for a long period of time is **NOT NORMAL**. A person who continually feels this way may be suffering from **DEPRESSION**.

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

Depression is a serious emotional problem that is mainly characterized by intense and persistent sadness.

In addition to profound sadness, anyone who has had at least **FOUR** of the following symptoms for a period of **TWO WEEKS** or longer should see a physician right away.

- Poor appetite or significant weight loss (when not dieting)
- Sleep disturbances (insomnia, oversleeping)
- Slow movement
- Loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities
- Loss of interest in sex
- Loss of energy; chronic fatigue
- Feelings of selfblame, guilt, or worthlessness
- Complaints and evidence of slowed thinking, inability to concentrate
- Preoccupation with death and dying; actual suicide attempt



It is important to note that older people are more likely to show physical symptoms accompanying depression. A list of physical complaints that may accompany depression are:

- Preoccupation with bodily complaints
- Pain (of unknown origin)
- Chest complaints (trouble breathing, palpitations, tightness)
- Abdominal complaints (passing a lot of gas, pain)
- Sensory problems (tingling sensations)



WHAT TO DO?

- Get help. Mental health professionals such as counselors, social workers, nurses, psychiatrists, and psychologists may be able to assist you. Older people tend **not to seek** psychological help on their own.
- Review medications taken by the older adult with the physician to check for those that may promote depression as a side effect.
- Do not take physical complaints lightly. Be aware of the onset of these complaints, what particular time of day they are worse and what causes them.

- Encourage the older adult to participate in social activities to decrease his/her sense of isolation, thereby increasing self-esteem.
- Pay attention to the elderly person's nutrition. Depressed people tend to ignore food or personal hygiene. Small but frequent, well-balanced meals should be made available.
- Encourage the older adult to take care of personal hygiene. Praise every small effort to do so.
- Involve the older adult in simple exercises. Exercises can be done while sitting down. Short walks are also helpful.
- Whenever possible, involve the older adult in simple household chores like folding laundry or wiping tables.
- Be vigilant for any suicidal gestures or signs of helplessness or hopelessness. Older folks tend to avoid making suicide threats—they just go ahead and kill themselves. Provide emotional support, genuine concern, and caring.
- Monitor use of medications to make sure they are taken on time and with the correct dosage. Taking medication at night maximizes the effects of natural and medicinal drowsiness, often providing the older adult with a sound night's sleep.

To hear a loved one in the midst of depression decry the uselessness of life and want an end to it is devastating. However, the caregiver needs to know that help is available for both the depressed loved one and his/her family. By tapping the various mental health resources in the community, the caregiver is able to distribute the weight of responsibility for care. With the many treatment modalities available come the creation of several opportunities for the caregiver to participate meaningfully in caring for the loved one.

This publication is designed to help employed caregivers of older adults who live at home and require assistance in activities of daily living. For more information about community services and programs, call **Senior Information Helpline at 768-7700**.

FACTS ABOUT DEPRESSION

- ◆ Depression is the most common of all emotional disorders in old age.
- ◆ Depression is more common among the old than among the young.
- ◆ Depression is more common among females than among males.
- ◆ Depression occurs in 20% of the population.
- ◆ Depressed people are three times more likely to commit suicide as nondepressed people.