



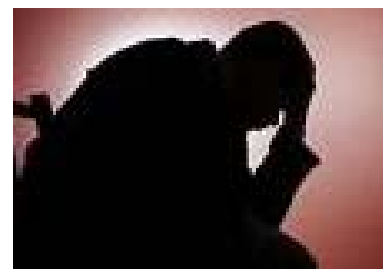
Depression: A Serious But Treatable Illness

Everyone gets the blues now and then. It's part of life. But when there is little joy or pleasure after visiting with friends or seeing a good movie, there may be a more serious problem. Being depressed for a while, without letup, can change the way a person thinks or feels. Doctors call this "clinical depression."

Being "down in the dumps" over a period of time is not a normal part of growing old. But it is a common problem, and medical help may be needed. For most people, depression can be treated successfully. "Talk" therapies, drugs, or other methods of treatment can ease the pain of depression. There is no reason to suffer.

There are many reasons why depression in older people is often missed or untreated. As a person ages, the signs of depression are much more likely to be dismissed as crankiness or grumpiness. Depression can also be tricky to recognize. Confusion or attention problems caused by depression can sometimes look like Alzheimer's disease or other brain disorders.

Mood changes and signs of depression can be caused by medicines people may take for high blood pressure or heart disease. Depression can happen at the same time as other chronic diseases. It can be hard for a doctor to diagnose depression, but the good news is that people who are depressed can get better with the right treatment.



What to Look For

How do you know when help is needed? After all, people may have to face the kinds of problems that could cause anyone to feel "depressed." Sometimes people have to deal with the death of loved ones or friends. Older people may have a tough time getting used to retirement. Some people may be trying to deal with chronic illness. But, after a period of grieving or feeling troubled, most people do get back to their daily lives. A person who is clinically depressed continues to have trouble coping both mentally and physically and may not feel better for weeks, months, or even years. Here is a list of the most common signs of depression. If these last for more than two weeks, see a doctor.

- An "empty" feeling, ongoing sadness, and anxiety
- Tiredness, lack of energy
- Loss of interest or pleasure in everyday activities, including sex
- Sleep problems, including very early morning waking
- Problems with eating and weight (gain or loss)
- Frequent crying
- Aches and pains that just won't go away

- A hard time focusing, remembering, or making decisions
- Feeling that the future looks grim; feeling guilty, helpless, or worthless
- Being irritable
- Thoughts of death or suicide; a suicide attempt

Families, friends, and health workers should watch for clues of depression. Sometimes depression can hide behind a smiling face. A depressed person who lives alone may briefly feel better when someone stops by to say hello or during a visit to the doctor. The symptoms may seem to go away. But, when someone is very depressed, the signs come right back.

Don't ignore the warning signs. Serious depression can lead to suicide. Listen carefully if someone complains about being depressed or says people don't care. That person may be telling you he or she needs help.

What Causes Depression?

There is no one cause of depression. For some people, one event can bring on the illness. Depression often strikes people who felt fine but who are struggling with a death in the family or a sudden illness. Sometimes differences in brain chemistry can affect mood and cause depression. Sometimes people become depressed for no clear reason.

Depression is sometimes linked to prescription drugs or certain illnesses. Some medications used to treat arthritis, heart problems, high blood pressure, or cancer can cause depression as a side effect. These side effects may not happen right away. Scientists also think some illnesses can cause depression. These include Parkinson's disease, stroke, and hormonal disorders.

Genetics, too, can play a role. Studies show that depression may run in families. Children of depressed parents may be at a higher risk.

Treating Depression

Depression can be treated successfully. Depending on the case, different therapies seem to work. For instance, support groups help some people deal with major life changes that require new coping skills or social support. A doctor might suggest that an older person use a local senior center, volunteer service, or nutrition program. Several kinds of "talk" therapies are useful as well.

One method helps people change negative thinking patterns that might have led to depression. Another way works to improve a person's relationships with others in an effort to lessen feelings of despair.

Antidepressant drugs can also help. These medications can improve mood, sleep, appetite, and concentration. There are several types of antidepressants available. Some drugs can take 6 to 12 weeks before there are real signs of progress. Drugs may need to be used for months or more after symptoms disappear.

Antidepressant drugs should be used with great care. This can help avoid unwanted side effects. Your doctor must know about all prescribed and over-the-counter medications being taken. The doctor should also be aware of any other physical problems. It is important to take antidepressant drugs in the proper dose and on the right schedule.

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) can also help. It is most often recommended when drug treatments can't be tolerated or there is an unacceptable delay in when drugs would become effective. ECT, which works quickly in most people, is given as a series of treatments over a few weeks. Like other antidepressant therapies, follow-up treatment with medication or occasional ECT is often needed to help prevent a return of depression.

Prevention

What can be done to lower the risk of depression? How can people cope? There are a few practical steps you can take. One way to prepare for major changes in life is to keep and maintain friendships over the years. You can also develop interests or hobbies, keep the mind and body active, and stay in touch with family to help limit the effects of depression.

Being physically fit and eating a balanced diet are ways to help avoid illnesses that can bring on disability or depression. Follow the doctor's directions on using medicines to lower the risk of depression as a drug side effect.

Getting Help

The first step to getting help is to accept that help is needed. The subject of mental illness still makes some people uncomfortable. Some feel that getting help is a sign of weakness. Many people believe, mistakenly, that a depressed person can quickly "snap out of it".

Once the decision is made to get medical advice, start with the family doctor. The doctor should check to see if there are medical or drug-related reasons for the depression. After a complete exam, the doctor may suggest talking to a mental health specialist. Your EAP is an excellent resource for assessment and resources for dealing with depression.

If a depressed person won't go to a doctor for treatment, relatives or friends can help. They can explain how treatment may help the person feel better. In some cases, when a person can't or won't go to the doctor's office, the doctor or mental health specialist can start by making a phone call. The telephone can't take the place of the personal contact needed for a complete medical checkup, but it can break the ice.

Source: National Institute on Aging

About MINES & Associates

For over 25 years MINES & Associates has been a nationally recognized business psychology firm that provides a variety of services to corporate employers including employee assistance programs (EAP), managed mental healthcare, organizational development and psychology services, wellness programs, behavioral risk management, disease management, PPO services, and a number of other technology based services. MINES & Associates is divided into two main divisions, Organizational Psychology and Health Psychology, and currently serves a diverse portfolio of clients in all 50 states, Canada, Mexico, and the UK. Please log on to <http://www.minesandassociates.com> for the latest news and information on MINES & Associates.