



Tipsheet: Depression Among Older Adults

Depression is an illness that affects many older people. It is estimated that millions of adults live with untreated depression and among the elderly, generally affects their physical and mental well-being.

Causes

Depression can occur for no obvious reason. It can also be a response to major life changes, such as the loss of a spouse or partner, the loss of a job (which in the case of the elderly may be due to retirement), the loss of good health, a change in living environment (such as moving out of a family's home), or the loss of a significant thing or relationship.

Depression Symptoms

Symptoms of depression can sometimes be mistaken for other illnesses or relatives and friends may think the symptoms are simply due to the aging process. Sometimes certain medications can have side effects that cause or mimic symptoms of depression.

It is important to consult with the person's physician regarding any of these symptoms:

- A sad, discouraged mood
- Feeling "blue" or empty
- Persistent pessimism about the present, future and past
- Loss of interest in work, hobbies, social life and sex
- Isolative behavior
- Difficulty making decisions
- Lack of energy; feeling "slowed down"
- Thoughts of death or suicide, especially specific suicide plans
- Restlessness, irritability
- Loss of appetite and loss of weight
- Disturbed sleep, especially early morning awakening
- Gloomy or desolate dreams
- Weight gain

How to Help

The most important thing anyone can do for a depressed person is to help him or her get appropriate diagnosis and treatment. Someone may need to make an appointment and accompany the depressed person to see a doctor and/or therapist. For an elderly person, it may also mean monitoring whether he or she is taking medication appropriately or experiencing serious side effects.

Offering Support

Besides treatment, the second most important thing to offer a depressed person is emotional support. He or she needs patience, understanding, affection and encouragement. Listen carefully to him or her. Do not criticize or diminish feelings, but point out realities and offer hope. Do not ignore talk about suicide. Always report this to the person's therapist or doctor.

Source: Administration on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.aoa.dhhs.gov, Senior Resources, 612-331-4063

Resources: United Way 2-1-1™ is a free and confidential 24/7 helpline that can connect you to over 40,000 community resources. Just dial 2-1-1 or 651-291-0211.