

Helping an older adult who is depressed

Depression is a common medical condition that affects about 15% of Americans over 65 years of age. Depression is not a normal part of aging and is highly treatable. Other medical conditions, such as cancer or heart disease, usually trigger depression in older adults. Often, depression in the elderly is not identified because it is hidden by other chronic illnesses and physical problems, or dismissed as senility.

People who are depressed feel more than sadness or “the blues.” They feel hopeless and suffer deep emotional pain for prolonged periods. Depression can cause dysfunction in every aspect of one’s life.

Two-thirds of people with depression do not seek treatment because they don’t understand their symptoms or have fear of the stigma of mental illness. Yet of those who do, 80% improve with medication, psychotherapy, or both.

Signs of depression

Older adults often complain of physical symptoms, including pain, fatigue, sleeplessness, and GI distress, rather than sadness, anxiety, or irritability. In addition, excessive alcohol consumption and drug abuse is prevalent among those with underlying depressive disorders.

If an older adult has been experiencing several of the symptoms below for more than two weeks, the person may be suffering from depression:

- Feeling miserable and sad almost everyday
- Losing interest or pleasure in most activities
- Feeling anxious or irritable
- Having trouble concentrating or remembering
- Feeling tired
- Feeling guilty or worthless
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Eating too much or too little
- Have medically unexplained aches and pains
- Thinking of death or suicide

In addition to the above symptoms, those suffering from **bipolar disorder (manic depression)** may exhibit some of the following mania symptoms: increased energy or decreased need for sleep; excessive irritability, euphoria, or aggressive behavior; increased talkativeness or pressured sleep; racing thoughts; impulsive behavior and poor judgment, such as spending sprees, erratic driving, or sexual indiscretions; inflated self-esteem; increased goal-directed activities; distractibility.

Signs of suicide

Depression is the leading cause of suicide. The highest rate of suicide is among the elderly, especially men over 80 years of age. If an older adult has been preoccupied with thoughts of death or suicide, call his or her doctor *today*. Other warning signs include:

- Talking about hopelessness and worthlessness
- Suddenly being happier and calmer during a depressive episode
- Making unusual visits or calling people one cares about

- Making arrangements or getting one's affairs in order
- Giving things away

(OVER)

How can I help an older adult receive treatment?

If an older adult shows symptoms of depression, you can help by getting the person a thorough medical evaluation. Only a medical professional (e.g., primary care physician, psychiatrist, psychologist) can diagnose your loved one and rule out other causes.

Since you see the person with depression often, you observe the person's symptoms more than their medical professional may. Therefore, you are invaluable in helping a medical professional become aware of the person's symptoms. Ask the older adult to see a medical professional, offer to make an appointment, and go with the person or call the doctor in advance to state the person's symptoms.

To receive coverage under many health insurance plans, the depressed person may need to see his or her primary care physician first, who may refer to a mental health specialist: psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, psychiatric nurse practitioner, psychopharmacologist. Check the health plan's coverage guidelines. You can also contact the state department of mental health for services available.

Some additional helpful tips:

- **Show you care.** People with depression feel isolated in their pain and hopelessness. Tell the older adult how much you and others care about the person, want the person to feel well, and are willing to help. Listen and sympathize with the person's pain.
- **Be informed.** Read a brochure, *Family Profiles* (see www.familyaware.org), or a book, or watch a video on depression and share the information with the older adult. Stress that depression is a treatable, medical condition, like diabetes or heart disease, not a sign of weakness. Assure the person that people with depression do feel better with treatment.
- **Use a symptom list.** Go through the depression symptom list with the person who is depressed or have the person take a confidential evaluation that will guide him or her toward medical help. Take the symptom list to the appointment for discussion with the medical professional.
- **Reach out.** Find other people to help you get your loved one into treatment, especially medical and mental health professionals such as your primary care physician or a psychiatrist, psychologist, or social worker. Think of others to whom the older adult will listen, such as family members, relatives, teachers, friends, or a member of the clergy, then enlist their help.

What not to do

People with depression are suffering from a medical condition, not a weakness of character. It is important to recognize their limitations.

- Do not dismiss their feelings by saying things like "snap out of it" or "pull yourself together."

- Do not force someone who is depressed to socialize or take on too many activities that can result in failure and increased feelings of worthlessness.
- Do not agree with negative views. Negative thoughts are a symptom of depression. You need to continue to present a realistic picture by expressing hope that the situation will get better.

How can I help manage treatment?

You can help an older adult manage treatment by reporting changes in person's symptoms and ensuring that the person consistently takes prescribed medication.

Families need to work together in managing treatment, since mood changes and behaviors affect the whole family, and many issues are involved in treatment. Ways in which you can work as a team are to:

- **Partner in treatment.** Medications take up to 4 to 6 weeks to take effect, the dosage may need to be adjusted, and medications often need to be changed. You can help an older adult by scheduling and tracking medications, making medical appointments, and reporting changes to the medical professional.
- **Be understanding.** Let the older adult continually know that you care. People with depression need to be reminded that many people are concerned about them.
- **Learn about depression.** The more understanding you have of the symptoms and issues surrounding depression, the more you can cope, help, and keep your expectations realistic. Review books, brochures, Family Profiles (see www.familyaware.org), and videos on a variety of depression topics.
- **Share your feelings as a family.** Since depression affects the whole family, it is important for everyone to share their feelings, both the older adult and caregivers. By talking about issues and emotions, you can uncover what works and what is not helpful to one another.
- **Meet with the older adult's doctor.** Meeting with the medical professional from time to time can be very helpful, if the older adult with depression will agree to it. You can gain a good understanding of the condition and discuss issues together.
- **Create a support system.** Try not to take on caring for an older adult with depression all by yourself because it is a difficult task and can bring you down. Talk to other family members about sharing responsibilities.

Questions for the clinician

What is the diagnosis at this point in time?

What is your therapy recommendation (e.g., medication, psychotherapy)?

How long will this therapy last and what are the expected results?

What signs should we look for that indicate the therapy is working?

How soon will we see these signs?

What are the risks and side effects of the medication?

How can we be involved in treatment?

Families for Depression Awareness

Families for Depression Awareness is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization that helps families recognize and cope with depressive disorders.

For a free *Helping Someone who is Depressed* brochure, call (781) 890-0220, visit www.familyaware.org, or write Families for Depression Awareness, 300 Fifth Avenue, Waltham, MA 02451.