

Dealing With Depression in Older Adults

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Depression in the older adult population is becoming a more prevalent and perplexing problem. Despite what some people think, depression is not a normal part of aging, but rather a serious, yet very treatable illness. Older adults are often misdiagnosed and undertreated, but yet are at increased risk of having depression due to living with long term health problems. Such events such as losing a spouse, loss of friends and other family members, or leaving a home you've lived in for many years can also trigger or enhance feelings of sadness and anxiety. If you are concerned about a loved one or friend, here are some tips to assist them in finding the help they need.



It is important to first understand what some of the symptoms of depression may look like. It can sometimes be difficult to diagnose in an older adult due to other contributing factors such as dementia, medication side effects, and other chronic health issues. Common signs and symptoms such as sadness and feelings of hopelessness occur both in older and younger individuals. But the older adult may also experience more feelings of confusion or forgetfulness, insomnia, loss of appetite, decrease interest in being with friends and family, fatigue, physical discomforts, changes in appearance, poor hygiene, and a general attitude of worthlessness. It is important not to merely accept unexplained changes in mood and function as a part of aging or illness, but rather recognize whether medical evaluation is warranted. Screening tools such as a Mini Mental Health Status Examination, as well as a Geriatric Depression Scale are available and can be useful in identifying symptoms of depression.

Strategies that may be helpful in assisting older adults with depression include:

- Listen to the individual, their caregiver, and/or family members.
- Acknowledge the person's feelings.
- Be reassuring and not judgmental.
- Recognize changes and trust your general intuition.
- Offer to accompany the individual to see their health care provider for evaluation.
- Evaluate medication usage and refer for pharmacist/physician consult if needed.
- Encourage physical activity, as capable.
- Encourage activities to protect or improve memory/mental sharpness (crossword puzzles, card playing, jigsaw puzzles).
- Provide appropriate resources, such as Senior Centers, transportation services, companionship services, caregivers, care managers.
- Seek medical help immediately if someone is in crisis.
- Acknowledge positive steps toward recovery.

Depression is one of the most successfully treated and manageable illnesses in later life, although some may think that sadness and depression are part of aging, so they don't take it seriously. Most depressed older adults can improve dramatically from treatment with the

potential outcome being an improvement in quality of life, not only for the individual but also for those around them.

Living Well Senior Solutions (LWSS) is a service of Episcopal Retirement Homes providing expert assistance with care management for older adults and their caregivers. For more information, visit livingwellseniorsolutions.com or call Peggy Slade-Sowers at (513) 561-0222.