

Depression in Later Life

Clinical depression is not a normal part of aging

Growing older usually means adjusting to changes in life. Sometimes, these changes can mean the loss of loved ones, of old routines and of excellent health. It's normal to feel sadness or distress during these periods, but most older adults move on and eventually feel satisfied with their lives.

Clinical depression is a serious illness that results in unnecessary suffering and, without treatment, may even lead to suicide. It's not normal for people to become depressed as they grow older. Clinical depression is treatable and should be treated at any age.

Clinical depression is not grief

For many, a depressed mood is a normal reaction to the death of someone they love or the loss of the ability to perform routine activities. People in grief may find it helpful to join a support group to talk with others who have similar feelings. But when a depressed mood persists with no sign of lifting, a person might benefit from talking with a mental health professional to determine whether clinical depression is the cause.

Clinical depression can be successfully treated

Clinical depression is one of the most treatable of all medical illnesses. In fact, more than 80% of people with depression can be successfully treated. Only a qualified health professional, however, can decide if someone has clinical depression. As with many illnesses, if treatment is needed, the earlier it begins, the more effective it can be. Furthermore, early treatment increases the likelihood of preventing recurrences.

No one can treat clinical depression on their own

Some older people think they're "too old" to get help for depression. Some may be reluctant to talk about their feelings. Others may not want to appear weak or think that depression will go away on its own if they "tough it out." These views do not help relieve the suffering found in clinical depression. Like any other medical illness, clinical depression requires professional treatment. It can't be treated on one's own.

Talking to friends, family members and clergy can give people the support needed when going through life's difficulties. However, for those with clinical depression, such support is no substitute for professional health care.

What are the causes of clinical depression?

Many things can contribute to clinical depression. For some people, a number of factors seem to be involved, while for others a single factor can cause the illness. Often times, people become depressed for no apparent reason. Regardless of the factors involved, clinical depression needs to be diagnosed and treated.

What You Need to Know...



- **Situational:** Difficult life events, including divorce, financial problems, moving to a new place, the death of a loved one, or any significant loss can contribute to clinical depression.
- **Gender:** Women are twice as likely as men to experience clinical depression. While the reasons for this are still unclear, they may include the hormonal changes women go through during menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause. Other reasons may include the stress of the many caregiver roles and responsibilities women have, including homemaker, mother, employee and spouse. In some cases, being a victim of abuse, of poverty or of low self-esteem may contribute to an increased risk of clinical depression.
- **Medications:** Some medications can cause clinical depression. Before taking new medications or over-the-counter drugs, a doctor should be consulted about possible side effects.
- **Co-occurrence:** Clinical depression is more likely to occur with certain illnesses, such as cancer, stroke, heart disease, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, diabetes and hormonal disorders. This is called "co-occurring depression." Any depressive symptoms with other illnesses should be reported to a doctor. It's important that co-occurring depression be treated in addition to the physical illness.
- **Biological:** People with depression typically have too little or too much of certain brain chemicals called "neurotransmitters." Changes in these brain chemicals may cause, or contribute to, clinical depression.
- **Cognitive:** People with negative thinking patterns - people who are pessimistic, have low self-esteem, worry too much or feel they have little or no control over life events - are more likely to develop clinical depression.
- **Genetic:** A family history of clinical depression can occur in people who do not have a family history of clinical depression.

Clinical depression is a treatable mental illness, and its treatment can save lives

The most common ways to treat clinical depression are with antidepressant medication, psychotherapy or a combination of the two. The choice of treatment depends on how severe the depressive symptoms are, the history of the illness, and individual preference. When talking to a doctor or qualified mental health professional, make sure they discuss these treatment options.

For more information, contact Mental Health America of Wisconsin at 414.276.3122, or via Email: info@mhawisconsin.org

Mental Health America is a United Way of Greater Milwaukee Agency



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