

Understanding Mental Illness: Depression

Depression is a serious and common disorder of mood that involves both mind and body. It affects the way you feel about yourself and others and the way you participate in life. Many people experience their first depressive episode after the age of 65, and many go untreated due to the myth that depression is a normal part of aging.

While depression is not a normal part of aging, older adults may be more vulnerable to the disorder because of common circumstances that put them at risk. These circumstances include; loss of a loved one, stress, changing health status, change in lifestyle or living arrangements, difficulty hearing or seeing, changes in physical independence, loss of social supports, challenges to self esteem, use of medications, use of alcohol, physical pain, cognitive changes. Because older adults may be more vulnerable to depression, they must be aware of risk factors and symptoms so that they may take preventative steps to protect their mental health or respond to mental health problems before they become more serious or dangerous.

Depression can be related to a physical illness and / or the medications used to treat common ailments. In older adults, depression commonly shows up as physical pain or irritability. When several of the following symptoms occur nearly every day for two or more weeks, it could mean that a depressive illness is present and an individual should seek help.

Symptoms of Depression:

- Depressed mood
- Withdrawal/isolation
- Loss of interest in pleasurable activities
- Change in appetite and/or sleep patterns
- Increased physical complaints
- Inability to focus, concentrate or decide
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Confusion and/or memory problems
- Irritability/anger/anxiety
- Neglect of self-care
- Suicidal thoughts

Depression is very treatable, often with a combination of medication and therapy. Unfortunately, there is much misinformation and misunderstanding about the treatment for depressive illnesses and many people resist getting appropriate care due to the negative stigma associated with the illness and treatment. It is important to put aside the myths and stereotypes of both aging and

What You Need to Know...



mental illness. Untreated depression can result in death as older adults have the highest suicide rate of all populations. This is most tragic given that close to 80% of older adults can recover from depression to regain a zest for life and freedom from negative symptoms.

For additional information about depression, contact: your county's Department of Health and Human Services behavioral health division, your primary care physician, a psychologist or therapist, your insurance provider or a clergyperson.

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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