

Depression and the Elderly

Feeling “down in the dumps” is not a normal part of getting older.

There is no single cause of depression. People can become depressed for no clear reason. An event, such as dealing with a serious illness or death in the family, can bring on the illness. It is usual and normal to feel sad in response to the situation. Older adults usually adjust and regain their emotional balance.

Growing older includes new and different challenges.

These can include:

- The financial constraints of living on a “fixed income”.
- Being alone or being apart from loved ones.
- Changes in your health and the ability to get around. This can result in the loss of independence.
- Changes in your eyesight can result in not being able to read and write, sew or do needlework. You may not be able to drive and participate in sports or other activities.
- Changes in mobility can mean not being able to take part in usual daily activities.



Depression can get better with treatment. Treatment usually includes medications. Treatment can also include talk therapy.

What can you do to prevent depression?

- Try to prepare for the major changes that can occur with growing older. Changes can include retirement and moving.
- Stay in touch with family.
- Make an effort to keep friendships.
- Start a hobby to keep your body and mind active.
- Become physically active. Garden, dance, swim or walk. There are mental and physical benefits to activity and exercise.



For the elderly, the symptoms of depression can be different. They can include feeling more tired and being somewhat grumpy. There can be problems with paying attention or being confused and having mood changes.

(continued)

Symptoms of depression can hide behind a smiling face.

An elderly person with depression can also experience:

- A feeling of emptiness
- Feelings of sadness or anxiety for a long time
- A loss of interest in every day activities
- Sleeping too much
- Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep
- Eating too much or too little – gaining weight or losing weight
- Crying
- Aches and pains that don't go away, even after treatment
- Having a hard time focusing
- Having a hard time remembering things
- Not being able to make decisions
- Feeling guilty, helpless, worthless or hopeless
- Thoughts of death or suicide or a suicide attempt

Being physically active and eating a balanced diet can help you avoid illness, including depression.



VA National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention
VHA Office of Patient Care Services
July 2007
http://www.prevention.va.gov/MPT/2007/DepressionandtheElderly_July2007.doc