

When depression is more than 'the blues'

For the elderly, depression may be accepted as an expected part of aging. But depression can adversely affect an older person's physical well-being. Though emotions, including mild depression, are a natural part of each personality, feelings of severe depression signal problems.

When depression lasts for weeks or months at a time and affects the whole body, or interferes with everyday activities, it is a problem. Severe depression robs energy; it is lonely, and it is emotionally painful. At these times, it is called depressive illness, and it is treatable.

What causes depression?

Causes of depression vary from person to person. Older adults experience lots of transitions in a short time. Spouses or friends die; capabilities and independence erode, and retirement means loss of career and income. These situations can lead to further losses, such as loss of self-esteem and social contact.

Any loss can make a person feel lonely or isolated. Those feelings lead to fear. A fearful person loses self-esteem and tends to be driven further into isolation and loneliness. The cycle leading to severe depression will not stop without intervention.

A stable personal environment decreases the risk of depression or its recurrence. Support from a network of family, friends or caregivers is an important help. Time shared with those who like and enjoy the company of a person at risk can keep him or her from sliding into the cycle leading to severe depression.

Warning signs

The diagnosis of depression is best handled by mental health professionals. Look for these signs when questioning whether a professional should be consulted.

- **Withdrawal from others.** Look for withdrawal from society, friends and family. Withdrawal can be forced by age-related circumstances such as deafness or another disability. It can also appear to be voluntary.

- **Lack of pleasure** in activities the person used to enjoy or an unusually low energy level.
- **Loss of appetite** often recognized as weight loss. A person suffering from depression may not feel like eating for long periods.
- **Irritable spells.** Depression can make someone seem cranky, especially if healthy eating or sleeping patterns are disturbed.
- **Sense of hopelessness.** Guilt or worthlessness is evident when a person is severely depressed. A depressed person may feel life is not worthwhile and wish to die.
- **Changes in behavior.** Reactions to medications can change emotional behavior. Depression can be a side-effect of a drug or drug combination. If depression is suspected as a side-effect, contact a physician.

Self-diagnosis can be dangerous. The safest way to manage any of these symptoms of depression is to seek professional advice.

The diagnosis of depression is a step toward improving the quality and enjoyment of life. Depression, treated early, has a better chance of successful outcome.

If you need help

If you or someone you care for experiences depression, talk to a counselor, who can help you sort things out. To make an appointment, call (810) 257-3742. In an emergency, call (810) 257-3740, or toll free at (877) 346-3648, where a counselor is available 24 hours a day. © www.genhs.org