

What is Depression?

Depression is an illness that upsets a person's mood, the way they behave, their thinking process, and the way they feel.

It is not an expected part of aging or a normal reaction to loss. It usually does not improve in response to things that happen, good news, or the passing of time.

What Causes Depression?

There are many things that can bring on a depressed feeling. There are chemicals called neurotransmitters in the brain that regulate our mood and the way we act. A problem with these can trigger symptoms of depression.

What are the Symptoms of Depression?

There are two key symptoms that occur almost every day for two weeks or longer.

The two key symptoms are:

- A depressed or sad mood
- Loss of interest or pleasure in doing things

Other symptoms include:

- A lot of weight loss or gain
- Trouble sleeping
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Feelings of guilt or not being worthy
- Not being able to think
- Thoughts of death or taking your own life

Are the Symptoms of Depression Different in the Nursing Home Resident?

Symptoms that may be present in the nursing home resident are:

- Vague aches/pains
- Increased use of health care help
- Decreased visiting with others or taking part in routine plans
- Acting out or trying to resist help
- Feelings that others don't like you
- Either lack of concern or being a "model" in terms of conduct

Depression in older people may differ from that of a younger person. The feeling may exist with other medical problems such as diabetes, stroke, heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, and arthritis. As a result, depression is often not noticed as a real symptom when there are other problems.

It's Hard to Recognize Depression

There are many reasons that it may be overlooked. This may lead to not knowing and not treating it in older people. These factors are:

- The myth that depression is a normal part of aging
- The myth that it is a normal response to losing things (like one's home or a loved one)
- The older person is shy to report or talk about their symptoms
- The older person complains more about aches and pains than their feelings

How is Depression Diagnosed in the Older Adult?

Screening

There are screening tools that a nursing home can use to help decide if the older adult is suffering from depression. Results on a depression-screening tool do not mean that the person has the problem. They show the need for further follow-up and review by a doctor or licensed mental health expert.

Assessment

This is the process that a doctor or clinician uses to diagnose depression. Vital data is collected to decide on the diagnosis — this will include the family background, how the resident presents to the doctor, medical problems, and lab test results.

Treatment Options for Older Adults

- Watchful waiting for people whose symptoms are of recent onset and are not severe enough to be diagnosed as major depression.
- Medicine or drugs are the newer classes of antidepressants that seem to be working well. Older people are doing better with them than before. Often, antidepressant drugs must be taken for 2-4 weeks before things seem to improve.
- Psychotherapy may be used alone or it can be combined with antidepressant medicine. Combined therapy is more effective than either treatment alone.

How to Help Yourself if You are Feeling Sad

It can make a person feel tired, worthless, hopeless, and helpless. These downbeat thoughts and feelings make some people want to give up.

To help you get better:

- Tell someone you trust how you feel
- Take part in activities that may make you feel better
- Take your medicine. Remember it may take 2-4 weeks before you start to feel better
- Make things as easy as possible for yourself
- Let family and friends help you

How Family and Friends Can Help a Depressed Person

The most important thing you can do for a depressed person is to help them get the right diagnosis and treatment. Do not ignore their downbeat feelings. Report changes in the way they behave and listen for thoughts or remarks about suicide. Let the staff or the doctor know RIGHT AWAY if you sense a problem.

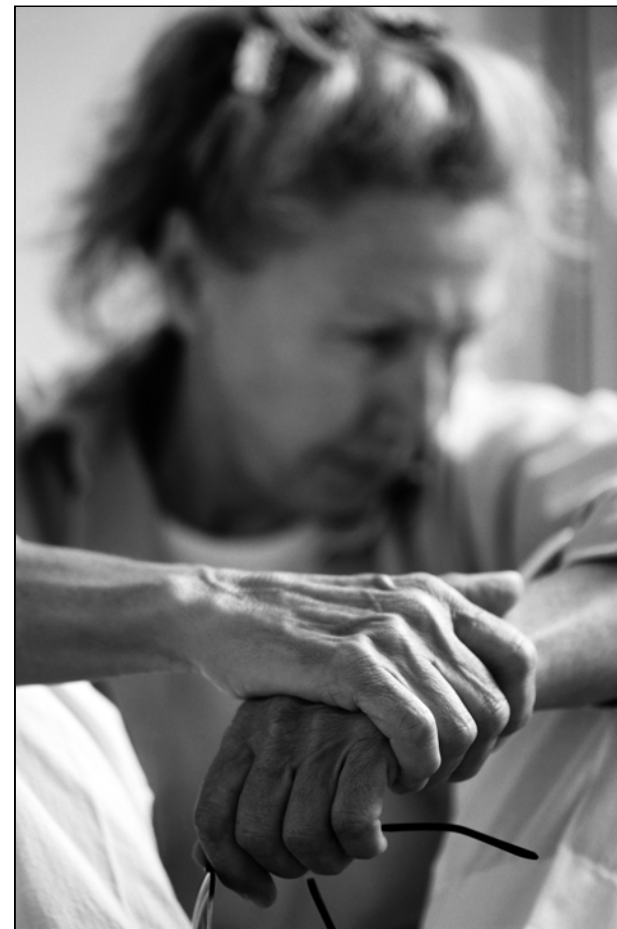
Don't accuse the person of being lazy, faking the illness, being weak, or having the ability to "snap out of it."

Don't try to solve all of their problems, but offer support by being patient. Remember, with time and help, the depressed person will get better. Your being there is important to treatment.



The Medicare Quality Improvement Organization for Georgia

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Depression and Older Adults

A Guide for Residents and Families