

Facts on Depression and Older Adults

Up to 20% of older adults experience serious depression. In Illinois, that means approximately 300,005 older people experience depression. Depression is a condition that changes thoughts and feelings, affects social behavior and sense of physical well-being. All of us have felt sad at one time or another, but that is not depression. Sometimes we are tired or discouraged when facing serious problems. This is not depression either. These feelings usually pass within a few days or weeks, once we adjust to the stress. When these feelings linger, intensify, and interfere with our daily routine, it may be depression.

What is a depressive disorder?

It is a condition involving body, mood and thought. It affects the way an older adult eats and sleeps, the way one feels about oneself, and the way one thinks about things. Depression is not the same as a passing blue mood. It is not a sign of personal weakness or something that can be willed or wished away. People with depression cannot merely "pull themselves together" and get better. Without treatment, it can last for weeks, months or years. Only 12 - 20% of older adults with depression receive treatment. Some of the reasons are:

- ▶ The symptoms are not recognized as depression.
- ▶ Depressed people are seen as weak or lazy.
- ▶ Social stigma causes people to avoid needed treatment.
- ▶ The symptoms are so disabling that the people cannot reach out for help.
- ▶ Many symptoms are misdiagnosed as physical problems.
- ▶ Individual symptoms are treated, rather than the underlying cause.
- ▶ People mistakenly believe that depression is normal for an older adult.

Causes of Depression

Some types of depression run in families, suggesting that it can be inherited. But, not everybody in a family will have the condition. Other factors (a serious loss, a difficult relationship, financial problems) can trigger its onset for older adults. Lack of mobility, either due to physical illness, or loss of driving privileges, can result in social isolation and loneliness which lead to depression.

Research shows that mental changes accompany physical changes. Medical illnesses (heart disease, cancer, Parkinson's Disease, respiratory disease and hormonal disorders) can cause depression. When a sick person is apathetic and unwilling to care for their physical needs, recovery takes longer. Often, a combination of genetic, psychological, and environmental factors is involved in the onset of depression. Later bouts of depression started with only mild stress, or none at all.

People with low self-esteem, who see themselves and the world negatively or who are readily overwhelmed by stress are prone to depression. Whether this is predisposition or an early form of the condition is not clear.

Signs of Depression

The first two signs must be present along with at least four others. Symptoms must last for two weeks and usually every day of the two weeks.

- ▶ **Feeling sad or irritable throughout the day.**
- ▶ **Loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed.**
- ▶ Changes in weight or appetite.
- ▶ Changes in normal sleep patterns.
- ▶ Fatigue or loss of energy.
- ▶ Feeling worthless, hopeless or unreasonably guilty.
- ▶ Inability to concentrate, remember things or make decisions.
- ▶ Restlessness or decreased activity.
- ▶ Complaints of physical aches and pains for medical reason.
- ▶ Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide – not just the fear of dying.

If you or someone you know is experiencing depression, talk to someone. Seek assistance because depression is NOT a normal part of aging.

For services in your area, contact: