

When It's More Than the "Winter Blues"

As beautiful as Vermont winters can be, for many it's a depressing and seemingly endless season, as we're faced with shorter days and lack of sunshine, and our regular activities are curtailed due to icy roads and dark nights. In light of the relentless weather this season, winter has been extremely challenging for many of us. Many people experience changes in mood and behavior or even depression from the lack of sunlight.

For most adults, it's a case of the winter blues that go away when spring arrives, but for elders it can be more than just mild winter depression. Older people may view the winter months with a sense of dread. Fear of falling restricts them from going outside, enjoying activities and getting physical exercise. Bad weather prevents friends and relatives from visiting. Often, elders find themselves confined to home which can lead to feelings of isolation and depression.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) defines depression as a medical illness in which a person has persistent feelings of sadness, discouragement and little self-worth. Depression in elders is a widespread problem, but is often not recognized or treated.

Many people are unwilling to admit to being depressed for fear of being seen as weak or unstable. Some older people will not report their depression because they believe that feeling sad is "normal," or that nothing can be done about it.

Causes

Some life changes can increase the risk for depression, or make existing depression worse. Some of these changes are:

- Adapting to a move from home to an apartment or retirement facility
- Chronic pain
- Feelings of isolation or loneliness as children move away and their spouse and close friends die
- Loss of independence (problems getting around, caring for themselves, or driving)
- Multiple illnesses
- Struggles with memory loss and problems thinking clearly
- Dependence on others and reluctance to ask for assistance.

Depression can be a sign of physical illness, the psychological reaction to the illness or a side effect of many drugs commonly prescribed for the elderly.

Symptoms

Early depression may be ignored, or confused with other more common conditions, making it hard to detect. Common symptoms such as fatigue, appetite loss, and trouble sleeping can be part of the aging process or a physical illness.

Older adults and their loved ones should be familiar with the following symptoms of late-life depression that usually last more than two weeks.

- Sleeping too much or too little
- Weight loss or gain
- Physical aches and pains
- Lack of energy and loss of interest or pleasure
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feelings of worthlessness or hopefulness
- Being more confused or forgetful
- Recurring thoughts of death or suicide

Here are some tips from the Geriatric Mental Health Foundation to help recognize, manage and prevent late-life depression.

Older Adults

- Take care of your health. Exercise regularly and get enough sleep.
- Learn to watch for the early signs of depression, and know how to react if it gets worse.
- Limit the amount of alcohol you drink.
- Stay in contact with friends and family members.
- Talk about your feelings with someone you trust.
- Take medications correctly and learn how to manage side effects.

Friends and Families of Older Adults

- Communicate with the older adults in your life—both those near and far. **Phone calls and visits, no matter how brief, help everyone stay connected.**
- Encourage regular social outings and contacts. Don't push, but make yourself available for needed transportation and other services.
- If you live out of town or out of state, attempt to locate services that would provide increased contact with others such as Meals on Wheels, Senior Center activities, Adult Day programs or a volunteer service through the community or churches.

When to Seek Help

If you think you may be experiencing depression, talk with your doctor. Depression is not a normal part of aging, nor is it a sign of weakness. It is a serious medical illness that can affect your health, and there are options for effective treatment of depression.

If you are caring for an aging family member and think they may have depression, contact their health care provider and share your concerns.

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