

Are The Blues Part of Your Later Life? They Don't Have to Be!

If you are an older person who feels depression or sadness that never seems to go away, you are not alone. Many, many older people feel depressed at some time in their lives. The good news is that almost everyone can get some kind of relief, whether by removing an outside cause of depression, trying one of the new medications, or simply talking to a trained counselor or therapist.

How Do You Know If You Are Depressed?

Occasional feelings of unhappiness or sadness are part of being human. We all experience failures, unhappy events, and emotional letdowns around holidays and anniversary dates. We all grieve when a family member, loved one, or friend dies. A person experiencing depression does not heal over time or feel better. Symptoms of depression include:

- * Feelings of sadness or emptiness, hopelessness, helplessness, or worthlessness
- * Confusion or memory problems, difficulty making decisions, inability to concentrate, loss of interest and pleasure in ordinary activities, or interest in suicide
- * Restlessness or irritability, sleep disorders, loss of energy, aches and pains without physical cause, isolation, drinking, confusion

Later Life and Depression

Some older people may have been depressed their whole lives. In other cases, depression may be the result of causes first encountered in older age. Some of these might be:

- * Losses, bereavement, health problems, loss of friends and family who enter nursing homes or move away, financial problems, and many other challenges facing those in old age can make coping difficult. Grieving over these losses is normal. However, when symptoms of depression appear, it is time to seek assistance.
- * Transitions. Older age is a time of transitions -- retirement and moving to another location are two major life milestones that can cause depression.
- * Medications. Many medications prescribed for various conditions can affect your mood. Sometimes the medication itself is the problem. Other times interactions between medications can cause depression. In these cases, simply changing medication can sometimes lift the depression.
- * Medical conditions. Some medical conditions for which older adults are at special risk also can be a cause of depression. These include strokes, certain types of cancer, diabetes, Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's disease.

* Substance abuse. Older people who are facing challenges related to later life may find that they are using alcohol or other drugs more often, or that drinking affects them more, or that alcohol is interacting dangerously with their medications. All of these can contribute to depression.

Depression in an older person can have serious consequences. In fact, older men are at the greatest risk of any group for suicide. In addition, depression can contribute to physical disability and, eventually, placement in a nursing facility earlier than would otherwise be necessary. In any case, depression reduces the quality of life that older people deserve in their later years.

Other Conditions Can Look Like Depression

Those who have symptoms of depression need to be diagnosed not only to treat depression but because the same symptoms can also indicate other conditions related to aging that may be treatable. Confusion and memory problems, for example, may result from Alzheimer's disease, a treatable dementia or cardio-vascular problems. It is important that the causes of the symptoms, whether depression or something else, be evaluated and treated.

Preventing Depression when You Are Older

If you have the symptoms listed above for clinical depression you should seek help from your physician or one of the resources in the "Community Resources" section. However, there are steps that can be taken by those who feel sad but not clinically depressed as well as those who want to ensure that they do not become depressed.

* Maintain your social network. Those who have close relationships with many people tend to be less depressed. If you are able to leave your home, nurture your friendships, get to know your neighbors, become active in religious or social organizations, and get back in touch with family members who you may not have had time to contact when you were younger. If you are not able to get out, become part of a friendly visitor program, use your telephone to call friends and family, and invite friends over to visit with you at home.

* Do something you find meaningful. Many older people find that once they retire or no longer have children at home they no longer feel useful. Everyone has something to contribute to their community. Volunteering for organizations or agencies, mentoring a child or teenager, finding part-time work and creative expression through writing, painting or other art form are all important ways to rediscover meaning in life.

* Don't neglect your spiritual well-being. Studies show that older people who maintain ties to a religious community are the healthiest. Spirituality, whatever that may mean to you, can also be nurtured in many other ways such as taking time to be with nature, meditation, and discussing important topics with friends and family. Finding ways to look beyond your immediate difficulties can be a wonderful way to prevent depression.

Treatment for Depression

Studies show that up to 90% of those with depression can be helped. The first step is a comprehensive examination by your physician including physical and neurological tests, a review of medications, and a mental status exam. Treatment will depend on the results

of these tests. Symptoms can usually be relieved quickly through counseling, medications, or both.

Medication or other medically based treatments should, of course, be provided by a physician, preferably with experience in treating depression in older people. For counseling you may wish to speak with your clergy or another counseling professional you trust. Your physician can also refer you to mental health services. Medicare and HMOs offering plans to Medicare beneficiaries provide various levels of in-patient and out-patient services. Check with your plan to determine what your benefits are. You may also need to look beyond what your insurance covers to secure the best services for you as an individual.

Community Resources

The Bedford Council on Aging offers many opportunities for volunteering, activities, and discussing your feelings in support groups for those 60 and over. In addition, Wendy Aronson, the Elder Services Coordinator, is available for anyone who would like to talk over feelings of sadness and depression. The COA is open from 8 till 4 Monday through Friday and 12 to 4 on Saturdays. All are welcome to drop in or call at 275-6825.

Bedford Youth and Family Services (BYFS) offers counseling to Bedford residents of all ages through a contract with Eliot Human Services. Appointments can be scheduled at offices in Bedford or at the Community Agencies Building in Concord. BYFS is open from 8 to 5 Monday through Friday. An appointment can be made by phoning 781-275-7727.