

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Older Adults and Depression

Many believe depression is a normal or inevitable part of the aging process, but this is not true. Studies suggest that the actual proportion of people who experience depression in their later years is approximately 15 per cent.

Far too many older adults suffer unnecessarily because their depression is untreated or ignored. Various factors contribute to this lack of attention, including the reluctance of some older adults to report mental health concerns of any kind.

In addition, it is not unusual for health professionals and family members to mistake the symptoms of depression for other conditions or to attribute them to a sadness that they view as part of the aging process. If you suspect that an older relative is depressed, try to approach the issue with an open mind. Depression can occur at any age and can also be successfully overcome.

Why Depression Often Goes Untreated

Depression in older adults often goes unnoticed or untreated. Older adults may not be comfortable verbalizing the feelings associated with depression. Many were raised during a time when counselling and other resources were not widely available and mental health concerns were not discussed. They may internalize their feelings of helplessness and sadness, or view them as a natural consequence of growing older. Often, even family and health professionals may feel that depression is an inevitable part of aging.

Signs of Depression

Because older adults may not volunteer the information that would indicate a problem with depression, it is important to keep alert for the signs. Remember also that the condition may mask itself in other physical symptoms and complaints. For example, an older person who is depressed may also become confused and exhibit some memory loss or mental cloudiness. Other signs include:

- Unusual fatigue, loss of energy and lethargy
- Changes in sleeping patterns
- Weight or appetite changes
- Inability to concentrate
- Inability to enjoy life
- Prolonged sadness with frequent crying
- Unusual irritability
- Behavior or cognitive changes
- Individuals suffering from depression may also increase their alcohol intake

Reactive Depression

Reactive depression is depression that occurs in response to a specific event, but it is no less serious. Older adults may be experiencing multiple losses and changes, including loss of spouse or friends or dramatic lifestyle changes. Health challenges and social isolation as a result of chronic conditions also often come with aging and can bring on depression.

How You Can Help

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Many times what is needed to combat depression is an attentive friend or supportive relative.
Encourage your older relative to talk to their doctor. A physical check-up may be recommended to rule out physical causes. Medication can be effective and is likely to be prescribed. Counselling and support services are available that specialize in older adult issues.

Support your older relative by letting him or her know that you are concerned and can be their link to the help they need.