



Seniors and Mental Health

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Stress and Depression are NOT Normal Parts of Aging

Growing older requires many adjustments to your life over time. For our grandparents and parents, change included the invention of the automobile, radio and television, as well as the emergence of the new communication age. As we age, we will also be stressed by such changes in our routines, changes in our health, and the loss of loved ones.

Sadness about these changes is normal. It is also normal that as the feelings of sadness diminish, we move on and feel satisfied with our lives. Sometimes, however, the sadness persists and the pleasure of daily life is lost. This may mean the person is suffering from clinical depression.

Depression is not a normal part of the aging process and often accompanies other serious medical conditions, making it difficult for doctors and seniors to identify. “If a senior’s medical condition like heart disease or diabetes does not improve with treatment, unrecognized and untreated depression may be the cause. Consult your doctor immediately.”

Older adults tend to deny or minimize changes in mood and instead identify

fatigue, difficulty in concentration, forgetfulness or loss of energy as problems. Depressed older adults often have multiple vague physical complaints, leading to numerous doctor visits. Depression in older adults also causes social withdrawal and a lessening of attention to personal hygiene and appearance.

Importance for Families

A significant 68% of older adults know little or nothing about depression. Many think they can “snap out of it” or handle it themselves. Few seniors believe that depression is a health problem, and only 42% would seek help from a professional.

If you recognize any of the changes described above in your aging relatives, it is important to know that help is available and that you may need to intervene to ensure your loved one gets the help he/she needs.

The nature of clinical depression often makes it difficult for the depressed person to recognize the symptoms or to find the energy and motivation to seek treatment. Family or friends should express concern and guide the depressed person to seek treatment and feel better. Since depression can cause confusion and withdrawal, family or friends may

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need to accompany the person to the doctor's office and help by asking questions and noting instructions.

Involvement of family or friends is also important because depression is a significant predictor of suicide in elderly Americans, and older adults who attempt suicide are more likely than young adults to succeed. All suicidal gestures or talk of suicide should be taken seriously.

The Fountain of Youth

Those who remember their history will recall that Ponce de Leon searched the South for the mysterious "fountain of youth" and never found it. However, research shows that seniors who walk the most have the best mental function.

The *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that elderly men who walked two miles per day were half as likely to get dementia as men who only walked a quarter of a mile per day. Another researcher noted in a Nurses Health Study that senior women who walked 90 minutes per week had better mental functioning than those who walked 40 minutes or less per week. Higher levels of long term and regular physical activity were directly associated with higher mental functioning. In fact, the researchers report the "benefits of

greater physical activity were similar to being three years younger in age."

Mental Gymnastics Slows Alzheimer's Disease

Some patients with Alzheimer's are rarely treated beyond medications. However, numerous studies now show that medication and mental exercises or homework can help with memory, verbal ability, problem solving and overall functioning. Examples of mental exercises include:

- verbally creating a story about a picture
- describing how to do something
- a counting or multiplication activity
- telling stories after seeing old pictures

Once-a-week sessions or homework assignments where patients engage in mental exercises has resulted in a slower rate of decline among Alzheimer's patients. The assignments also provide good stimulation for conversation with family and caregivers.

Looking for More Information?

For more information about seniors and mental health, call 584-9125 or log onto www.mhaet.com to access mental health and aging information, including a free, confidential Geriatric Depression Screening.



Warning Signs and Symptoms of Mental Illness in Adults

- confused thinking
- prolonged sadness or irritability
- feelings of extreme highs or lows
- excessive fears, worries
- social withdrawal
- dramatic changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- delusions or hallucinations
- inability to cope with daily problems and activities
- denial of obvious problems
- numerous unexplained physical ailments
- substance abuse
- suicidal thoughts