

DEPRESSION IN OLDER PEOPLE

The Good And Bad News

The good news: depression is not an inevitable experience of aging. It can be treated. It does pass. There are many causes of depression-traumatic events, bereavement, illness, prolonged stress, social factors, or a build up of life changes and losses over a period of time. Sometimes it just comes 'out of the blue.' Women are more susceptible than men but the main risk for developing depression later in life is when there have been episodes earlier in life.

Most people experiencing the challenge of aging have times of feeling 'down', it's the combination of symptoms over a period of weeks that indicates help is needed. Some indicators are lack of motivation, loss of interest in anything, sleeping difficulties, appetite changes, persistent feelings of being bad or guilty, feeling that life isn't worth living, loss of confidence, preoccupation with physical symptoms.

The bad news: untreated depression can cause death. People don't understand and give frequent 'snap out of it messages'. Close relationships can be seriously affected. There is a lack of knowledge that depression has a physical cause –a chemical imbalance in the body affecting mood levels. Many people believe it is due to a weakness or failure.

Fear of medication also prevents people seeking help from their GP. Some people who do get treatment stop taking the medication after only a few weeks and then plummet into depression again. For most people, medication is required for nine to 12 months and must only be reduced slowly with a doctor's advice. Some people have to learn to accept they will need to take medication indefinitely. It is a gift to maintain health and well-being.

Good news continued: treatment is not only about drugs. Many doctors refer patients to counselling and social support.

They may learn new ways to express feelings rather than suppressing them, ways to manage stress, and how to focus on the body's physical needs. Diet, exercise, sleep and relaxation are all part of managing depression.

Negative thinking can be very destructive and toxic. I find many who come to counselling are so hard on themselves. They are driven by shoulds, shouldn'ts, musts, and the expectations of others or understandings of God that are damaging them and certainly not life-bringing.

Depression can be likened to a wilderness experience –a journey through a lonely and frightening desert place where wild animals of the mind prowl and the water of life can't be found. It's a privilege to journey with people when they seek counselling. To see the emergence of new growth, life, purpose and self-appreciation is so rewarding.

The willingness to accept help and treatment and make their own effort to move out of that frightening place can bring a transformation that is good news indeed.

'Summing it all up friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling and gracious –the best not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly, things to praise, not to curse' Philippians 4:8

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