

Caregiver's Corner Column (October 2013)

Depression in Older Adults: It's Not Normal

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“Many people think that depression is something you just have to live with when you get older, but it's not.” – Tom Bosley (of television show *Happy Days* fame)

Feelings of being “down” or “sad” are often acknowledged as being expected or common in older adults; after all, “who wouldn't be” with the changes and losses that go along with growing older? Statements similar to this are often uttered by older adults themselves, well-meaning others, and even medical professionals. Unfortunately, the underlying meaning in the statement is that the individual is expected to “just deal with it,” or recognize that “everyone goes through it at some time or another.” This type of attitude can discount the possibility of the presence of a more serious issue, a true depression.

Depression is NOT a normal part of growing old. The Geriatric Mental Health Foundation reports that depression impacts 15% of adults over the age of 65 in the United States. Compare that statistic to the fact that 9% of all adult Americans experience symptoms that lead to a diagnosis of depression according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and it is obvious that older adults seem to have a greater chance than the general population of experiencing depression. However, rather than viewing it as normal, depression should be seen as a treatable medical illness.

The people closest to older adults, such as caregivers, are key in identifying the presence of symptomology that could indicate depression. Symptoms in older adults can vary from person to person, but could include:

- Persistent sadness
- Frequent tearfulness
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- Feeling “slow”
- Withdrawing or isolating from usual social activities
- Excessive worrying
- Restlessness; pacing; fidgeting
- Feeling worthless or helpless
- Loss or gain in weight
- Thoughts of death, harming oneself, or suicide

Caregivers should watch for these signs of possible depression, being aware that depression can be hard to separate from multiple physical problems, and can also be mistaken for dementia. It should also be noted that if the caregiver has identified that the older adult is stating that he or she would like to harm him or herself, the threat should be taken seriously and the Suicide Prevention Lifeline should be called immediately at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). The call will be routed to a local resource that can help appropriately address any suicidal intent.

If a caregiver suspects that depression may be present in his or her loved one, the first step is to discuss the concern with the older adult. The tone of the conversation should be caring, open, and non-aggressive, as depression could carry a stigma in the older adult's mind.

The second step is to encourage the elderly individual to talk to his or her primary medical care provider about the possibility of depression. The primary medical care provider can then take steps to rule out reversible and treatable causes of depression, including treatable medical conditions and side effects of medications used to treat other medical problems. Ultimately, the goal is for the provider to identify and link the older adult to appropriate treatment.

The topic of depression is sensitive and can be loaded with stigma, particularly in the minds of older adults. It is often downplayed and termed "the blues" or "feeling sad" to avoid stigma. It is important that depression be recognized as a treatable medical problem and resources be put in place to improve the older adult's emotional state, and therefore their quality of life. The caregiver can be the key to making that happen.

Caregiver's Corner is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.