



WINTER BLUES?

The holidays are over, the weather is dreary and confining, the days are short. This time of year can be tough for some people. Many recognize that they suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder and make extra effort to get out and involved, and some use light therapy to get through these dark months.

Most of us experience periods of depression at some point in our lives. Sometimes it is a brief episode in reaction to a loss. Other times it may be a protracted grey mood, or a protracted debilitating illness that can be life-threatening. Sometimes we recognize it and get treatment, but often it remains undiagnosed or misunderstood.

Many factors contribute to depression in older adults. Losses and changes in family, friends, pets, home, health, and purpose are common. It may be hard to accept diminishing capacities of cognitive or physical health. Isolation increases as people go out less. Chronic health conditions and their management may have depressing side effects. Medications can affect mood, particularly when mixed with alcohol or other drugs. Disruptions in sleep patterns can affect mood and ability to cope. Worries about finances or the future have a strong effect as well.

Key symptoms of depression are:

- Sadness
- Fatigue
- Sleep disturbance (difficulty falling or staying asleep, oversleeping, daytime sleeping)
- Loss of interest in pleasurable activities • Weight loss or loss of appetite • Loss of self-worth
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs • Fixation on death, suicidal thoughts or actions

Sometimes the signs are not recognized as sadness. A person may complain of physical aches and pains, exhibit slowed movement, anxiety, hopelessness, memory problems, lack of motivation or energy, loss of interest, irritability, or neglect personal care. The person may have less self-awareness or reduced ability to describe what they are experiencing. Family and medical practitioners alike may attribute these to aging or other factors in a person's life.

Often depression is confused with grief, a normal response to loss which diminishes over time, and frequently interspersed with periods of joy or pleasure. Depression is common with chronic pain, immune disorders and other chronic conditions. It may be confused with dementia, but depression often manifests more quickly, poor concentration is more noticeable than memory loss, language and motor skills are slowed but not impaired, and there is more self-awareness and concern than in dementia.

I recently saw a person whom I've known for a few years. This person seemed abnormally quiet, the smile and the spark were gone, and it was hard to engage in conversation; I missed the stories about recent activities. I learned that the person isn't getting out as much and seems to be more forgetful. There is also a new medication in the mix. All symptoms that might easily be missed, even by close family who aren't ready to see decline. This person is a prime candidate for assessment.

Depression is NOT a normal part of aging or a character flaw! If you--or someone you know--are exhibiting these symptoms, seek a professional evaluation. There are many interventions that can help. For example, as a friend or family member, you can facilitate re-engagement in social activities with a visit or invitation to go out. Help them discover new pleasures, eat healthy foods, get enough sleep, and re-engage in physical exercise.

Counseling can address the related sources of stress and anxiety and underlying feelings. I am always impressed by the resilience that people have gained with life experience, and find that my role is often helping them reconnect with coping strategies they have used in the past, or discovering new strategies for managing current realities. Your doctor can evaluate the effect of your health conditions and treatments. Anti-depressant medication can be prescribed if necessary. Alternative therapies can work too, such as light therapy mentioned above for SAD. When treated properly, most symptoms are relieved. Treating depression can contribute significantly to quality of life.

PSRC offers many programs that can alleviate depression. Every activity has a strong social component. Let's Talk and support groups are designed to build connections. There are many exercise classes to get you moving and other classes to engage your mind. Set up an appointment with a care coordinator so we can link you to resources in the community.

Wishing you joy in the new year!

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