

# A Caregiver's Guide to Understanding *Depression and Aging*

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It is estimated that 15 out of 100 adults over age 65 will experience an episode of depression. Unfortunately, these are often undiagnosed and, if left untreated, can be life-threatening. *Seniors can be more prone to depression for many reasons related to the process of aging, including:*

- Difficulty adapting to reduced mobility
- Frustration with lifestyle changes such as moving from a family home to a retirement home
- Sadness due to changes in family structure, such as loss of a spouse
- A reaction to chronic pain or illnesses and their side effects which can be more prevalent among seniors: strokes, respiratory problems, diabetes, and neurological disorders like Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease
- Side effects of commonly prescribed medications for these illnesses

Recognizing the difference between sadness and depression can help you identify when your loved one may need help. Everyone experiences "life's ups and downs" or the "blues" during their lifetime. Feeling sad, disappointed, or experiencing grief after the death of a loved one or the loss of a job is an expected reaction, and does not usually

interfere with a person's daily routine. Depression is different. The symptoms tend to last longer, generally two or more weeks, and interfere with a person's ability to manage their day-to-day activities. They may also experience a loss of interest or pleasure in activities they regularly enjoy. And, they can be affected physically as well as mentally.

According to the National Institutes of Health, only about 10 percent of seniors suffering from depression receive treatment. When treated, however, studies show that older patients respond well. A Pittsburgh Medical Center study found that 80 percent of seniors treated over a three-year period didn't suffer recurrent bouts, while only 10 percent of those without treatment avoided relapse.

Getting proper treatment can make a significant difference in a person's health and overall quality of life. Hayley Folse, RN and Behavioral Health Nurse with THE MEDICAL TEAM advises, "If you suspect that a loved one has behavioral health issues such as depression, it's important to talk with their physician as there are unique research-based programs designed to assist them and their families at home." THE MEDICAL TEAM's Journey Behavioral Home Health program, which was developed with a nationally-recognized expert on psychiatric home care, helps individuals cope with issues that may affect their ability to care for themselves, including



“I like/love all of you.”  
 “I’ll stick with you no matter what.”  
 “All I want to do is give you a hug and a shoulder to cry on.”  
 “You are not crazy.”  
 “I’m sorry you’re in so much pain.”

changes in physical or mental abilities and changes in behavior. The Program is especially suitable for seniors, whether they reside in their own home, with family, or in a senior community.

In addition to helping your loved one seek treatment, there are many other ways you can help. It is common to feel at a loss about how to respond to someone who may be depressed, but there are things you can say to help reassure your loved one. Such examples are saying:

“I care about you.”  
 “You are important to me.”  
 “You’re not alone in this.”  
 “It will pass; we can ride it out together.”  
 “Do you want a hug?”  
 “I’m not going to leave/abandon you.”  
 “If you need a friend....”

Examples of other ways to help include; inviting them out and scheduling regular social activities, seeing that they eat healthy meals, encouraging them to follow through with treatment, making sure all medications are taken as instructed, and most importantly watching for suicide warning signs and reporting immediately if you suspect they might be thinking about suicide.

No matter one’s age, life presents unexpected challenges, and individuals facing emotional and behavioral challenges are certainly not alone. Help from certified professionals and programs can provide treatment with solutions and play an instrumental role in improving lives.



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