

Could That Be Depression?

Learn how to tell if your aging loved one or friend is struggling with depression.

Caregivers are often used to dealing with a wide range of emotions in the people they're looking after. But depression is more serious than a bad day here and there. If you think the person in your care might be struggling with depression, get them the help they need as soon as possible. The following information will help tell you some signs to watch for and how to get the right treatment.

Depression and Older Adults

Depression is not a normal part of the aging process; in fact, many older adults experience more contentment than ever before. When older adults do experience depression, it can be hard to see. But if left untreated, it “increases the likelihood of disability, placement in a nursing home, or death from any cause,” according to Harvard Medical School.

Watch for These Symptoms

You might be familiar with depression symptoms that are true for any age. These include loss of interest in activities, changes in sleeping patterns, or tearfulness, for example. But when the person struggling with depression is an older adult, there are additional things to watch for. Be on the lookout for these symptoms:

- Memory loss or personality changes
- Physical aches or pain
- Fatigue, loss of appetite or sleep problems not caused by a medical condition or medication
- Often wanting to stay home
- Suicidal thinking or feelings, especially in older men



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Getting Help

Depression can be overwhelming, but it is treatable. Your first step as a caregiver is to get in touch with your friend or family member's doctor. They can assess the situation during an appointment. Go with your family member or friend so that you can help them describe what they've been feeling in case they are unable to.

After the assessment, treatment options might include medication, therapy, alternative treatments or a combination of all three. If medication is prescribed, be sure to ask their doctor or check that it doesn't interact with any other medications the person you're caring for is taking. And don't allow your friend or family member to stop taking the medication without the help of a doctor.

Once the person you're looking after is on a treatment plan, the best thing you can do is to offer your continued support. Be patient and encouraging. Also remember to get help for yourself if you start experiencing depression, which can be fairly common in caregivers.

If you're caring for someone who expresses or exhibits suicidal thoughts, get help immediately. Call 911 or the toll-free, 24-hour hotline of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

Risk Factors

Some people are more prone to depression than others. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIH) reports that these factors can increase a person's risk:

Being female

Having a chronic medical illness or disability

Being a poor sleeper

Being lonely or isolated

Having a family history of depression

Using certain medications (your loved one's doctor or pharmacist can help you determine this)

Misuse of drugs or alcohol

Experiencing a stressful life event, such as losing a spouse

Sources:

Association for Psychological Science: Why are older people happier?

<https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/releases/better-research-is-needed-to-understand-whyelders-are-happier.html>

National Institute on Aging: Depression and older adults

<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/depression-and-older-adults>

Harvard Medical School: Recognizing and treating depression in the elderly

https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/Recognizing_and_treating_depression_in_the_elderly

Mayo Clinic: Depression (major depressive disorder)

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/symptoms-causes/syc-20356007>

National Institute of Mental Health: Older adults and depression

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/older-adults-and-depression/index.shtml>

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