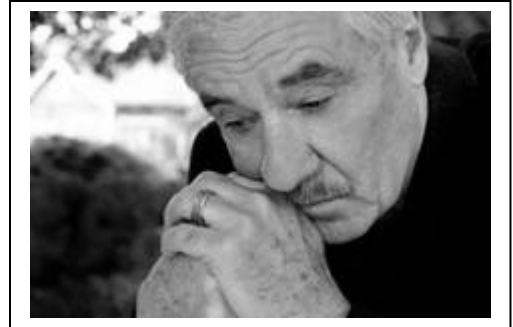


## Depression in the Elderly

The difficult changes that many older adults face—such as the death of a spouse, loss of independence, and health problems—can lead to depression, especially in those without a strong support system. But depression is NOT a normal or necessary part of aging.

Depression symptoms such as aches and pains and fatigue are often overlooked in the elderly. This is dangerous because depression increases the risk of illness, death, and suicide. It is important to learn how to spot and treat depression in older adults.



### What is Depression?

According to the World Health Organization, **depression** is a common mental disorder that presents with depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, low energy, and poor concentration. These problems can become chronic or recurrent and lead to substantial impairments in an individual's ability to take care of his or her everyday responsibilities.

### Common Causes of Depression

#### *Psychological Causes:*

- Unresolved, repressed traumatic experiences
- Previous history of depression
- Damage to body image
- Fear of death
- Frustration with memory loss
- Difficulty adjusting to stressful/changing conditions
- Substance abuse

#### *Physical Factors:*

- Inherited tendencies toward depression
- Co-occurring illness
- Vascular changes in the brain
- Vitamin B-12 deficiency
- Chronic or severe pain

#### *Environmental Factors:*

- Loneliness, isolation
- Retirement
- Being unmarried (especially if widowed)
- Recent bereavement
- Lack of a supportive social network
- Decreased mobility due to illness or loss of driving privileges

#### *Personality Characteristics:*

- Low self-esteem
- Extreme dependency
- Pessimism

#### *Medication Side-Effects*

## Symptoms of Depression

It is not unusual for senior adults to experience sadness, social isolation, and loneliness when faced with any of the common causes of depression. Real depression is characterized by a persistent mood that does not lift, interferes significantly with ordinary life functions or activities, and ultimately may lead to suicide. Because some of these symptoms are similar to those caused by other conditions, including dementia, it is important to see a geriatric specialist for an evaluation.

## Is It Depression or Dementia?

Because of many overlapping symptom presentations, depression is sometimes misdiagnosed as dementia. It takes a medical evaluation to distinguish between depression and dementia, but you can think of the difference this way: A depressed individual may have poor concentration and forget where he left the house keys, while a person with dementia does not know what they are called or perhaps cannot remember their purpose and tries to use them for something else.

### *Depression:*

- Abrupt onset
- Alternating, recurring course
- Minimal memory impairment
- Affect/mood sad and depressed
- Intellect unimpaired
- Comprehension good
- Abstraction good
- Confusion rare
- Delusions consistent with affect
- Hallucinations rare, possible auditory
- Speech slowed
- Psychomotor retardation
- Personality temporarily regressed
- Judgment fair to good
- Insight fair to good
- Continent
- Prognosis good

### *Dementia:*

- Gradual onset
- Progressive course
- Marked memory impairment
- Affect/mood labile, may be depressed
- Intellect very impaired
- Comprehension poor
- Abstraction poor
- Confused often, worse at night
- Delusions mostly persistent paranoid
- Hallucinations episodic, auditory
- Speech rambling, incoherent, delayed
- Psychomotor tremors, rigidity
- Personality deteriorated, uninhibited
- Judgment poor
- Insight absent
- Incontinent
- Prognosis very poor

## Treatment in Senior Adults

Treatment depends on the cause and severity of the depression and, to some extent, on personal preference. In mild or moderate depression, psychotherapy is often the most appropriate treatment. But incapacitating depression may require medication for a limited time along with psychotherapy. In combined treatment, medication can relieve physical symptoms quickly, while psychotherapy enables the patient to learn more effective ways of handling his problems.