

Office Staff Training

Depression in Seniors



Depression is a common but serious condition for people of all ages, but it's of special concern for senior patients. Because the symptoms of depression can coincide with other problems, depression in older adults is often overlooked and undertreated.

Causes of Depression

There are a variety of causes for depression and could include one or all of the following:

- Past trauma, such as an accident, injury or the sudden death of a friend or loved one
- Genetics
- Brain structure or chemistry
- Life events, such as the loss of friends, family and independence
- Side effects caused by prescription medications, illicit drugs or alcohol abuse
- Chronic illness, disease or pain
- Hormone changes

Signs and Symptoms

The severity and frequency of symptoms and how long they last will vary depending on the individual. Signs of depression include:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sadness or “empty” mood that persists for two or more weeks• Hopelessness or expressing feelings of helplessness or guilt• Irritability or restlessness (trouble sitting still)• Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies or activities (abandoning favorite pastimes)• Loss of self-worth (worries he/she is a burden, feels worthless/self-loathing)• Increased use of drugs and/or alcohol	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions• Aches or pains, headaches, cramps or digestive problems without a clear physical cause and that do not ease with treatment• Fatigue or decreased energy• Lack of motivation or chronic boredom• Moving or talking more slowly• Sleeping problems (too much or not enough)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Excessive anxiety and worries (unable to find a peaceful place)• Experience loss of appetite or weight loss• Neglecting personal care (skipping meals, forgetting medication, neglecting bathing/ brushing teeth, wearing clean clothes)• Social withdrawal and isolation (reluctance to contact friends, engage in activities, leave the house)• Fixation on death or suicide or has attempted suicide
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If one or more of these symptoms lasts for two weeks or longer, the patient may be suffering from depression.

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Depression in Seniors (cont.)

Case Study

Mr. Frank Lane comes into the office for his six-month A1c review and physical. He is not his typical, talkative self. When the medical assistant, Molly, asks how he has been doing, Mr. Lane states he doesn't feel like himself. He says he's having problems sleeping and has no appetite, which he realizes is a bad thing since he is a diabetic.

How to Speak to the Patient

Molly should ask Mr. Lane:

- “Can you tell me what you mean by not feeling like yourself?”
- “How long have you been having trouble sleeping? Do you sleep at all or just for short periods?”
- “How many meals do you eat in a day? Have you been skipping meals? How long have you been experiencing a lack of appetite?”
- “Are you experiencing any other symptoms that are making you feel like this and how long have you been experiencing them?”

To better assist her, Molly should consider using a PHQ9, a patient questionnaire consisting of nine questions. The questionnaire is used for screening, diagnosing, monitoring and measuring the severity of depression and rates the frequency of the symptoms and the response to treatment.

You can download a copy of the PHQ by visiting https://biolincc.nhlbi.nih.gov/static/studies/masm/PHQ_9.pdf.

Next Steps:

Mr. Lane may:

- See depression as a sign of weakness.
- Be worried that he'll be seen as “mentally ill”.
- Be unwilling to discuss feelings.

Molly should tell Mr. Lane:

- Depression is extremely common.
- It's nothing to be ashamed of.
- Even the most severe cases can be treated.
- The earlier treatment begins, the more effective it will be.

Molly should then bring Mr. Lane's mood and responses to his doctor's attention so his doctor can talk to Mr. Lane about how he's feeling and develop a treatment plan.

More Information

- National Institutes of Health depression basics website: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression/index.shtml>
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: **1-800-273-8255**