

Clinical Depression

BASIC FACTS:

Clinical Depression is a greatly misunderstood and all too often untreated illness that affects about 5% of community dwelling adults over the age of 65 in the United States. The frequency of incidents is considerably higher in long-term care facilities, where 15% to 25% of people in this age group are afflicted.

Clinical depression is more than just feeling "down", which we experience now and then at all ages. For example, it's normal to feel sad and "empty" for a period of time after the death of a loved one, retirement or a serious illness. But most people can endure these difficult times without becoming clinically depressed. The important thing to remember is that simply growing older does not cause sadness or despair.

Clinical depression is clearly **not** a personal weakness. It's a common, very diagnosable and very treatable medical illness that should not be ignored. It's symptoms can range from mild to severe.

Symptoms of Clinical Depression:

1. Feeling sad or irritable throughout the day.
2. Loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed.
3. Changes in weight or appetite.
4. Changes in normal sleep patterns such as:
 - ◊ Difficulty falling asleep
 - ◊ Interrupted sleep
 - ◊ Early morning awakening
 - ◊ Increase in sleep
5. Fatigue or loss of energy.
6. Feeling worthless, hopeless or unreasonably guilty.
7. Inability to concentrate, remember things or make decisions.
8. Restlessness or decrease in activities.
9. Complaint of physical aches and pains for which no medical causes can be attributed.
10. Recurrent thoughts of suicide or death (not just fear of dying).

Men and women do not experience depression at the same rate. Twice as many women as men experience the illness, so it appears that women are much more vulnerable to clinical depression than men. Studies have shown that men are more likely than women to ignore their symptoms of depression, and try to cope with emotional pain by turning to alcohol or drugs.

The loss of a long-term partner or friend is often a frequent occurrence later in life and it's normal to grieve after such a loss. But it may be clinical depression rather than bereavement if the normal period of grief leads to a prolonged, intense grief and loss of pleasure in activities previously enjoyed. Normal grief usually resolves in about one year.

Health Tips

Those grieving often find it helpful to join a mutual support group (i.e. a widowed persons group) so that they can talk to others who have shared similar experiences. If prolonged grief is accompanied by any of the following symptoms, the individual in question should seek medical attention.

- Guilt unconnected with a loved ones death
- Inability or refusal to acknowledge the reality of death
- Intense emotions at the mention of the deceased years after the death
- Inability to function at ones usual level
- Recurrent thoughts of ones own death (not just fear of dying)
- Persistent feelings of worthlessness
- Difficulty sleeping
- Weight loss

Remember that only a doctor or qualified mental health professional can make a definitive diagnosis of clinical depression. If your physician or healthcare provider decides that your persistent symptoms are being caused by depression, don't despair. Effective treatment options are available. In fact, clinical depression is one of the most treatable of all medical illnesses. More than 80% of people diagnosed with depression can be treated successfully with antidepressant medication, psychotherapy or a combination of the two. Only a qualified healthcare professional can decide if someone has clinical depression and prescribe a treatment plan.

Remember, as with many other illnesses the sooner you seek treatment, the better. Early treatment can increase treatment effectiveness.

ATTENTION: This web page is intended to be used for health information ONLY. If you or a family member has a medical emergency, please call your doctor or 911, or your local emergency service number.

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