

# DEPRESSION: SENIOR BLUES

by

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The elderly who are depressed reside on an isolated island. Depression frequently is masked by complaints of illness, being angry and irritability or feeling nervous. Stress is considered a major factor in depression. Many individuals become depressed because they cannot control certain aspects of their lives, be it work, health or interpersonal relationships. Even feeling anxious over life events can create a side effect of depression. Grief and loss are considered normal causes of a depressive reaction. The key is that after an appropriate time of grieving one's depression lifts and life resumes as usual. Most individuals have experienced some form of mild depression. The good news is that mild depression is often reactionary or situational and goes away when a difficulty is resolved. Problems occur when depression is reoccurring or unceasing.

## **What are signs of depression?**

*Any change in normal behavior patterns that creates:*

- Withdrawal from others
- Irritability
- Unusual anger outbursts
- Lost of interest in activities
- Not having a purpose and meaning in life

More overt signs of depression often indicate that the individual has been depressed for some time.

*Signs of depression such as:*

- Crying frequently
- Sad most of the time
- Forgetfulness or lack of concentration
- Excessive sleeping or insomnia
- Increased weight loss or gain
- Minimal verbal communication
- Irritability
- Poor grooming
- Inability to think clearly
- Loss of energy and feeling fatigued
- Thoughts of death or suicide

**These symptoms point the way toward a need for professional assessment and treatment.**

## **What are the unique depressive signs for seniors?**

The loss of purpose and meaning in life creates a void and vacuum that gets filled with depression. Retirement and illness can catapult a relatively adjusted and happy individual into the depths of depression. Many seniors lose power and influence in life, become dependent on others for care and develop a mind-set that says, "I'm not worthy anymore." Depression can creep up on an individual and eat away at one's life worse than cancer. *Depression often goes undetected in seniors, until it is too late to heal.*

"I'm just fine dear," Mom said, only her voice sounded softer and slower paced than her customary style.

"Just stop bugging me!" Dad yelled. His usual calm, quiet demeanor was gone.

When I asked her to join us for a ride, Mom said, "Nah, I just don't feel up to going anywhere,"

John reported that during his last visit to his parent's home, "I noticed that Dad wore the same shirt every day. He had never put on the new one I gave him for his birthday last month. It was still in the box. Mom kept taking more and more naps during the day. She said she was just very tired."

"I'm just no good to anyone these days," said Grandma. "I'm just a burden to you all."

The last time Allison went home to spend time with her mother she realized that all but one of her mother's best friends had died. Her mother told her, "I'm am so lonely. Sue and I are the last of the line now. No more weekly bridge games."

These mild, yet significant behaviors become cues that require further investigation.

Seniors find the "Golden Years" not as they are advertised. They experience health decline, energy levels drop, spouse, siblings, and friends die and work decreases or ceases. Recreational activities often are curbed due to poor health, inability to get around, and loss of companionship. Most seniors experience a vast decrease in financial freedom. Living on a fixed income restricts their access to certain health care, recreational activities and travel.

The seniors who take advantage of senior centers, senior life-style communities and senior education find less isolation and more healthy activities. Be aware that a senior who lives and partakes of such life-style activities may still become depressed. Much depends on the value structure of each individual. For most seniors having a positive relationship with spouse, sibling, adult children, grandchildren or friends is of the utmost importance. Interpersonal

relationships are the primary cause of stress among human beings. The “family feud” serves as fuel for depression.

Watch for an increase in negativity and blaming others for one’s misery. When the senior’s focus becomes fixated on what is wrong in the world and they do more “knit picking” about small and incidental happenings these become critical indicators of increased depression. Attitude toward life sets the tone for acceptance or rejection of the inevitable aging process. Negativity is a value structure that greatly increases as one ages. Continually “seeing the cup half empty,” points the way toward a depressed psyche.

### **Mending broken relationships with the elderly**

All too often parent, children and siblings find themselves cut off from one another through the years. As one nears the *old old category* [ages 75-84], and the old oldest age group [85 plus years of age], parents, adult children or grandchildren and siblings may want to mend fences but don’t know what to do. Family cut offs may have existed for years. People took pride in not talking to one another or every time they did talk it wound up in a fight. For some the cut off will carry on to one’s grave, for others there is a sincere desire to bridge the gap and come to a closer relationship. The best approach is straightforward and honest communication, in writing, over the telephone, e-mail, or in person. Dive right in and “tell it like it is”. Do remember that relationships are two-way streets. You reach out. The other person needs to accept the offer. Family therapy is helpful in repairing shattered relationships.

“Look Mom, I know we haven’t talked or been close in years. That doesn’t mean that I haven’t missed you. I have. Whatever time we have together I want it to be better. How about you?”

Tom e-mailed his Dad; *I know I’ve been a jerk. For many years I did not make you proud. Now I want you to know me, as I am today clean and sober. I would like to come for a visit and talk, walk and shoot pool together. You’ve got two great grandkids that would love to meet you. Are you game? Love, Tom*

“Please, don’t hang up, just hear me out!” We’ve both made mistakes. I’ll take my share and even a little more. We can’t change the past. I’d like to have us spend the rest of our lives in at least a civil relationship. I’m sorry, if I hurt you. I’d like to go to lunch next Saturday. I’ll pick you up. A rule--that we only say positive things to one another. How about it?”

If such direct communications are not possible then write a letter saying what you would like to have happen. Avoid blaming and using “you statements.” Try to write using “I statements”. Write a second letter that is the response you would like to hear from the other person. You may send the first letter and wait for a response or you might send both letters, or you could not send the letters at all and just try at another time. You will feel better having written the letters.

Making contact is healing. The best healer is a tender touch and a hug. Remember the aged Chinese proverb. ***The past is history, the future is a mystery and the moment is a gift---that is why we call it THE PRESENT.***

### **What are crucial life events that trigger depression for seniors?**

- ◆ Loss of health and mobility
- ◆ Loss of hearing or sight
- ◆ Chronic pain
- ◆ Death of spouse, child, sibling or close friend
- ◆ Divorce
- ◆ Conflict with a family member or close friend
- ◆ Loss of job
- ◆ Retirement
- ◆ Financial Loss or significant change in economics
- ◆ Forced move to retirement home or assisted living
- ◆ Family moves away
- ◆ Unable to drive an automobile

### **What are treatment options?**

Seniors need competent and specialized medical attention. They often need an advocate who talks to their doctor and periodically accompanies them for their medical visits. While medication is one method of treating depression it may not be the first line of defense. Frequently psychotropic drugs interact with other medications and could cause more emotional problems. It is best to have the consultation of a psychiatrist that specializes in treating the elderly when determining the need for anti-depressant medication.

Outpatient psychotherapy helps relieve depression. Talking to an objective third party alleviates stress. It gives the elderly a new person to share their problems with who remains confidential and non-judgmental. The depressed person may not want to burden family members with their heavy heart. Research has shown that the best treatment for depression is medication, if needed, *and* psychotherapy. Medication alone has not been as effective as psychotherapy alone. If a depressed senior is reluctant to see a psychotherapist at first then have family members go with them for *family therapy*. The caregiver needs a support system as well and a therapist is an invaluable resource. Group therapy provides a forum for socialization as well as treatment. Many senior centers and outpatient mental health facilities provide group therapy. The groups may have a specific focus such as grief and loss or coping with a chronic illness. There are groups for caregivers as well. On a more positive note, a group process might center on life journals, genealogy,

and complying family photographs into albums that tell a story of an individual's life.

The most important component for relieving depression is developing a purpose and meaning in life as one ages. Many corporations and colleges offer classes in preparation for retirement. Seniors need involvement in community activities, churches, temples, spiritual workshops and educational classes. Encourage involvement in programs such as *Elder Hostels*. Learning a foreign language and playing a musical instrument or singing have been found to increase brain cells even as one grows older. Keeping an individual's mind active helps lessen the negative effects of aging and depression.

Keeping in touch with family and friends helps relieve loneliness and isolation. For a shy or introvert individual reaching out is more difficult. Such a person needs to be encouraged or taken out by a trusted relative or friend to meet other individuals. Some seniors prefer to remain isolated and cocooned in their confines. They feel safe there and need an outstretched hand in order to move out into the world. Involving the elderly in family events and taking them to community-religious happenings help bridge this isolation. It is essential to have telephone conversations with a depressed senior on a regular basis. Whenever possible distribute the calls between family members and friends. If only one person makes the calls that individual faces burnout. While television is a comfort to the person shut inside the computer maybe a way of reaching out and interfacing with others. Learning to use the computer may be a lifesaver for isolation associated with depression. One must have patience in teaching and encouraging an elderly person to learn how to use the computer.

When an elderly person gets depressed they stop moving. Physical exercise is essential in helping to relieve depression. Walking and swimming are the best exercises, while other seniors may bicycle ride, play golf, tennis, or shoot pool. The challenge comes in trying to get the depressed senior moving again. Health decline may limit movement. Consult a physical therapist to determine a program for exercise. Take the depressed senior outside for a walk to a park, the beach, lake or a shopping mall, even if you are pushing them in a wheelchair.

### **Treatments for depression include:**

- ❖ Medication
- ❖ Outpatient psychotherapy and group therapy
- ❖ Family therapy
- ❖ Journals and life stories
- ❖ Involvement in church or temple
- ❖ Community clubs
- ❖ Elder education
- ❖ Physical exercise
- ❖ Music classes and concert programs
- ❖ Computer classes
- ❖ Educational day trips
- ❖ Planting a garden
- ❖ Volunteering in schools

### **When are seniors most vulnerable to depression?**

The third defined stage of old age known as *old old category*, ages 75-84 and the *oldest old category*, ages 85 plus, are the most rapid growing part of our population. This age group represents ***life in slow motion***.

- ◆ Being single again
- ◆ Being a Widow or Widower
- ◆ Living alone
- ◆ Forced Retirement
- ◆ Decline in income
- ◆ Decline in health
- ◆ Death of a child or grandchild
- ◆ Cut off from family members
- ◆ Cessation of hobbies or sports
- ◆ Physical disabilities
- ◆ Move to assisted living facility
- ◆ Move to nursing home

### **How can the oldest old be helped with their depression?**

Without a doubt, positive people relationships and laughter are the best medicine for depression at this stage of life. This by no means negates the possibility for medication and psychotherapy treatment. James Taylor, the songwriter wrote, "*The secret of life is enjoying the passage of time*". Helping seniors find meaningful ways to spend their time is essential. Learning to do meditation and even studying and practicing yoga promotes mental and physical health. Viktor Frankl wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning*, that when all else fails

us, such as our health and even our freedom is gone, we still have our minds and our attitude toward life to give us purpose and meaning. Such was the case of Morrie Schwartz in *Tuesdays With Morrie*.

Stopping negative thoughts is one of the best treatments for depression. When a senior has too much idle time on their hands they think and ruminate "ain't it awful". Keeping an individual's mind busy with people, projects, journal writing, reading, listening to books on tape, hearing poetry read aloud, music, television, computers, telephone conversations, or hobbies helps refute negative thoughts. Most seniors are complimented when a trusted person comes to videotape or audiotape their life's story. In fact, meeting a new "young friend" who makes regular visits perks up the depressed person often better than family members. This scenario was played out in the movie *Fried Green Tomatoes*.

During this stage of aging many individuals are shut inside their home, apartment or assisted living facility. Visiting, calling or emailing lifts the spirits of one who is shut inside the cave of depression. Talking a walk together or sharing a meal with one another become highlights of a depressed person's week. If a caregiver lives far away then elicit the help of an agency, religious center or volunteer group to make visitations on a regular basis. The aged person enjoys friendly human contact. *Patch Adams* taught us that laughter does break down the resistance of angry, depressed and bitter individuals. Children help the aged to smile and find meaning in life. Remember the story where the crotchety, depressed grandfather taught his grandson how to fish *On Golden Pond* and found his smile and joy in life. Animals Assisted Therapy has become a valued resource for putting a smile on the face of a depressed elderly person. Many homes for the aged encourage visitations from *Therapy Dogs and Cats* and frequently have resident dogs, cats, rabbits and birds. Planting and caring for a potted garden brings smiles to seniors, as well as create a purpose and meaning for many shut-ins.

In our Western society we fail to honor the importance of elderly wisdom. Encouraging an older person to *teach us something, share their wisdom* helps create a bridge to the island of elder depression. Even from a wheelchair or a hospital bed the elderly can be a *coach and a teacher*. People need to take the time to ask and listen to the old, old person for advice, knowledge and wisdom--- a recipe, a quilting project, a history lesson, or learning some sports trivia.

Watching videos and reading books help give family, friends and caregivers insight into the mental state of the elderly.

### ***Suggested Videos***

- *Cocoon*
- *Fried Green Tomatoes*
- *Grumpy Old Men*
- *On Golden Pond*
- *Tuesdays With Morrie*

## ***Suggested Books***

- Alбом, Mitch. *Tuesdays with Morrie*
- Fischer, Ed & Jane Noland. *What's so funny about getting old*
- Horowitz, Joy. *Tessie and Pearl*
- Miller, Nancy. *Creative Aging*
- Skinner, B.F. & Vaughn. *Enjoy old age*
- Swanson, Jennifer(ed). *Physical and mental issues in aging source book*