

# Depression in later years

Coping with these changes can be stressful and hard to handle at times. Some people become depressed, which affects their ability to enjoy life. What's more, certain illnesses and medicine can cause people to feel depressed. The good news is that help is available, and you don't have to face your problems alone. If you see signs of depression in yourself or a loved one, get help right away.

Up to 90 percent of people who suffer from depression later in life don't receive adequate care, with 78 percent receiving no treatment at all.

When people think of their golden years, they often imagine relaxing days in the garden, on the golf course or with family and friends. Yet many changes come along with growing older. Older adults often have to cope with the death of a spouse or family member. Many older adults have more health problems than in their younger years.

## Facts about depression in later years

- Depression is the most common emotional disorder among older people, affecting approximately 7 million people aged 65 and over.
- Depression is a serious problem that needs treatment. It does not go away on its own.
- Depression in older people is often overlooked or misdiagnosed by health care professionals.
- Older people with depression are at higher risk for suicide.

## Signs of depression

Depression has many signs. If you feel sad or often have no interest in daily activities, you may be depressed. Other common signs include:

- Persistent sadness or pessimism lasting two or more weeks
- General fatigue or loss of energy
- Incapacitating grief after the death of a friend or spouse that lasts for more than a month
- Frequent crying
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Excessive worries or anxiety about finances and health problems
- Changes in appetite, loss of weight or overeating
- Irritability
- Disturbed sleep patterns
- Restlessness or difficulty concentrating
- Loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities, such as work, hobbies, sex or social contacts

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- Feelings of hopelessness
  - Substance or alcohol abuse.

### How do I know if I'm depressed?

Ask yourself the following questions:

- During the past month, have I constantly been feeling down, depressed or hopeless?
- During the past month, have I constantly had little interest or pleasure in doing things?

If you answered “yes” to either of the questions, you may be depressed. Contact your health care professional for a thorough evaluation.

### Types of care available for depression

The first step in seeking help is to see your primary care physician or a behavioral health professional. Step two is to work with your provider to choose the care that's right for you. The most common types of care are:

- **Psychotherapy:** This involves talking with a behavioral health professional (therapist) about ways to better cope with changes in your life. Research has shown that it is effective for depression and that most people see progress in a timely manner.
- **Antidepressant medication:** Medicine can help correct an imbalance in the chemicals that control a person's mood. You will usually see signs of relief within four weeks. Most medicine can be used safely but should be prescribed by a doctor who knows about the drug and how it might affect other medicine you may be taking. Be sure to tell all of your doctors about all of your medical conditions and medicine. A psychiatrist or your primary care physician can prescribe these to you.

- **A combination of the two treatments:** This approach combines “talk therapy” with antidepressant medication and can be more effective for some people than medicine or psychotherapy alone.
- **Support groups:** Support group participants often find it helpful to discuss their feelings and concerns. Some groups may have a facilitator or leader, while others are more informal. For referrals about a support group for depressed older people, ask a physician or a psychiatrist, or a local mental health agency or association. Area hospitals and mental health centers also offer information.
- **Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT):** In electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), a physician sends a carefully-monitored electric current through the brain to produce changes in its electrical activity. Also referred to as electroshock therapy, ECT is sometimes used to treat major depression, and research has shown that the treatment particularly helps elderly people. During a treatment, muscle-relaxant medications and general anesthesia safeguard a patient from the effects of electroshock. Although ECT was once regarded as a controversial procedure, recent medical and technological advances have made ECT a relatively safe treatment for severe depression after medication has failed. If a physician recommends ECT, it's a good idea to get a second opinion from another physician or psychiatrist. Make sure that other treatment alternatives have been exhausted before considering ECT.



## How you can help

You can play a major role in getting better, but you cannot treat depression on your own. Below are some steps to get you started on the path of healing:

- **Make a list.** Write down any signs of depression that you are having, along with your questions.
- **See a health care provider.** Do not assess the problem yourself. See a primary care physician or a mental health professional. Share your list with your provider, and ask any questions about depression and treatment that you may have. Make sure your provider knows all of your medical history and all of the medications that you are taking.
- **With your provider, determine the right care, and begin.** Ask your provider to discuss the benefits and risks of the many care options. Ask your provider for expert advice.
- **Learn more about depression.** Your doctor or local mental health association can suggest reading materials. They can also tell you about local support groups.

- **Update your provider about your progress.** Ask questions about your progress. Stay with treatment. Do not stop taking any medicine when you start to feel better. Never stop taking medicine without first talking with your doctor. Depression can be treated. It should be given the same attention and care that all other serious medical conditions are given. Taking care of yourself is the first step.

## For more information

- **Mental Health America (formerly National Mental Health Association)**  
Website: [www.mentalhealthamerica.net](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net)  
Phone: 1-800-969-6642
- **National Association on Mental Illness (NAMI)**  
Website: [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)  
Phone: 1-800-950-6264
- **National Institute of Mental Health**  
Website: [www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml)  
Phone: 1-866-615-6464

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