

Understanding Depression and Suicide in Older Adults

Depression is a health condition that affects how you feel, think, and act. It is not just feeling sad for a few days. It is a lasting problem that can make everyday life hard.

Depression in older adults is often not recognized or treated. However, it is not a normal part of aging. Although many older adults may feel tired or have trouble sleeping, those with depression also often lose motivation and willingness to do things. They might describe this as being “tired,” but it is often that they have lost interest in things they once enjoyed.

Depression can also cause someone to end their own life. In fact, depression is one of the biggest risk factors for suicide in older adults. Families should pay close attention to older relatives who have depression and live alone.

The good news is that depression can, and often does, get better with care. Support from family and friends makes treatment more likely to work.

Having depression does not mean you are weak. Many older adults go through this. It is OK to ask for help. Your care team is here to support you in any way we can.



Causes of Depression in Older Adults

There is no single cause. Many things can lead to depression in older adults, such as:

- **Health problems:** Long-term illness, pain, or disability
- **Loss:** Death of a spouse, family member, or friend
- **Loneliness:** Living alone or feeling left out
- **Less independence:** Not being able to drive, cook, or care for yourself
- **Past mental health issues:** Depression or anxiety earlier in life

Signs and Symptoms of Depression

You may have depression if you:

- Feel sad, hopeless, or empty
- Have little interest in hobbies or daily activities
- Sleep too much or too little
- Eat more or less than usual
- Feel very tired or have low energy
- Have trouble thinking clearly
- Feel worthless or guilty
- Think about death or hurting yourself

Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

If, at any time, you have thoughts of self-harm or suicide, please talk to someone right away. The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline offers free, 24/7 call and text access to trained crisis counselors who can help anyone in emotional distress. Just call or text 988.

Testing and Diagnosis

Your care team will:

- Ask about your symptoms and feelings
- Do a physical exam to check for health problems

- Review all the medicines you are taking to make sure they are not causing symptoms
- Use a short quiz or questions to screen for depression

You may be asked to talk about how long you have felt this way and how it affects your life.

Treatment

The first thing your care team will do is treat any physical causes of depression-like symptoms. They may also make changes to your medicines and supplements if they could be the cause of your depression.

Your care team will address other things that may contribute to depression. These could include housing, home care, diet, and exercise.

If these steps do not help, talk therapy and antidepressant medicines may be added to your treatment.

Medicine

Your care team may give you antidepressants. These are medicines that help improve mood. They may take a few weeks to work. Your care team will talk to you about side effects.

If you take other medicines or supplements, your care team will check to make sure they are safe to take together. Never stop taking medicine without talking to your care team.

Talk Therapy

Your care team may recommend talk therapy, also called counseling. For this treatment, you meet with a therapist or counselor to talk about your feelings. They can teach you strategies for coping with stress and loss. They can also support you in starting habits that will make you feel better.



Healthy Habits

- **Eating well:** A balanced diet helps your brain and body feel better. Try to eat more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins.
- **Sleeping enough:** Your body and mind heal during sleep. Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time each day.
- **Staying active:** Movement helps lift your mood. Even a short walk each day can help. Ask your care team about the type of activity that is right for you.



Lifestyle Changes

- **Seek social support:** Stay in touch with family and friends. Join a group, go to church, or take part in community events.
- **Quit or limit alcohol and sleep aids:** Alcohol and sleep aids can make depression worse. Talk to your care team if you need help cutting back.
- **Stick to a routine:** Having a daily plan can give you purpose and structure.

Follow-Up Care

- You may need regular visits to check on your mood and medicine.
- Your care team may change your treatment if needed.

When to Contact Your Care Team

Call your care team if you:

- Feel sad, empty, or hopeless most of the time for more than 2 weeks
- Lose interest or pleasure in activities you used to enjoy



- Have trouble sleeping, or are sleeping too much or too little
- Eat much more or much less than usual, or have unexplained weight changes
- Feel very tired, low on energy, or listless most days
- Have trouble concentrating, remembering things, or making decisions
- Have physical aches or pains, such as headaches or stomachaches, that do not improve with usual treatment
- Feel worthless, guilty, or very nervous
- Want to be alone most of the time
- Have questions or concerns about your mood, mental health, or changes in your behavior

When to Call 911 or Go to the Emergency Room

Get help right away if you are, or if you witness another person:

- Talking about wanting to die or kill yourself
- Looking for ways to harm yourself, such as searching for methods or making a plan
- Saying you feel like a burden to others or that others would be better off without you
- Making threats or statements about harming yourself or others
- Acting very anxious, agitated, reckless, or showing extreme mood swings
- Attempting suicide or self-harm, like taking too many pills or cutting yourself

Thank You for Choosing Us

Thank you for trusting us with your care. We are here to support you and want you to feel your best. Contact us with any questions.

IF YOU HAVE A MEDICAL EMERGENCY, CALL 911 OR GO TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM.



The information presented is intended for general information and educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice of your health care provider. Contact your health care provider if you believe you have a health problem.

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