

Factsheet 4

Depression in Later Years

We all feel down or fed-up at times but these feelings don't usually last and are a normal response to problems or difficulties in our lives. However, when they don't go away, are more than we can cope with, and our ability to carry out daily tasks and have satisfying personal relationships is affected, it may be depression the illness.

Depression is very common and may affect as many as 1 in 4 people at some point. People of all ages and backgrounds are susceptible but it is particularly common among older people. An estimated 25% of those living in the community and 40% of those in residential care homes are affected at any one time.

What Causes Depression

Usually there's more than one cause or risk factor. Most of these fall into one of the following categories:

Heredity: being born to a parent or close relative who has had depression may increase our risk

Environment: current factors like poor housing, money worries, stress, relationship problems, physical illness, loneliness

Life events and experiences: past issues like bereavement, abuse, bullying, job loss, relationship break-up

Personality: people with a more sensitive personality or who have perfectionist tendencies are more vulnerable to depression.

Most people with depression probably fall into two or more of these categories and the more factors that apply the greater their risk. Sometimes there doesn't seem to be any reason.

Why Are We More at Risk in Later Years

A number of factors contribute to increased risk at this stage - stopping work, having less money, loneliness, health problems, the death of a partner or friends. In spite of this, depression in later years should not be considered as inevitable or normal.

Symptoms of Depression

At least two of the following core symptoms for at least two weeks:

- An unusually sad mood that does not go away;
- Loss of enjoyment and interest in activities that used to be enjoyable;
- Tiredness and lack of energy
- In addition, people who are depressed can have a range of other symptoms such as:
- Loss of confidence in themselves or poor self-esteem;
- Feeling guilty when they are not really at fault;
- Wishing they were dead;
- Difficulty making decisions and concentrating;
- Moving more slowly or becoming agitated and unable to settle;
- Having difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much;
- Loss of interest in food or eating more than usual, leading to weight loss or weight gain.

The number and severity of symptoms experienced will determine whether the depression is diagnosed as mild, moderate or severe.

What Helps for Depression

If you think you are depressed you should see your GP as soon as possible. Earlier treatment leads to a better recovery. The GP can also rule out any

other medical cause for your symptoms. He will decide on suitable treatment depending on the severity of symptoms. The three main types of help for depression are:

Medication

Anti-depressant medication is effective for the treatment of moderate/severe depression and up to 70% of older people in this category will improve, although recovery may be slower than that expected for a younger person. Modern antidepressants are not addictive and have few serious side effects. However, in older people, antidepressants can lower the amount of salt (sodium) in the blood - this can make you feel weak and unsteady. Ask your GP for advice if this happens and about any other troubling side effects.

Talking therapies (psychotherapies)

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) has been proven very effective for mild/moderate depression and in preventing relapse. It works on the basis that if we change our unhelpful thinking patterns and behaviour it will improve how we feel. However, if waiting lists are long or you can't access CBT there are many excellent self help books based on CBT. Computerised CBT is also available as are

other types of therapy and counselling. Any of these may be used with/without medication.

Self-help strategies

When we're depressed, we tend to do less and less because of the tiredness, difficulty sleeping/eating, and negative thinking. We stop doing things we used to enjoy. It can get so bad that we can't go to work or do things at home. We stay in bed or stay at home doing very little and we isolate ourselves from friends and family. Increasing our activity levels can make a big impact on our mood but it's important to get a balance of activities that give you a sense of:

Closeness e.g. walking with or visiting friends/family, talking on the 'phone, going to lunch clubs

Achievement e.g. completing daily chores, tidying the garden, volunteering

Pleasure e.g. reading, going to the cinema, dancing, visiting the local park, keeping up with hobbies

It is also really important to eat properly, get balanced sleep and to be as active as you can on a regular basis. Avoid alcohol or keep to safe limits.

See our Factsheet 3 for more information on looking after your mental health. Take slow, small steps and choose activities that suit you. Don't forget to plan rest/relaxation periods too and remember most people with depression recover fully.



**For details about our other services, publications and fact sheets,
or for general information about our charity, visit our website:
www.aware-ni.org.uk or call our helpline on 08451 20 29 61**