

Caring For A Loved One With Dementia

a practical
guide
for family
caregivers
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Depression and Dementia



Introduction

Depression is a very common diagnosis for individuals in the early and moderate stages of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. It is also often overlooked, or misdiagnosed as a phase of the dementia rather than a separate, treatable condition.

Depression and dementia have an intertwined relationship- like the chicken or egg debacle, because in many cases, we may not know which came first. The reason for this is because depression in mid-life is a risk factor for dementia. People who are struggling with depression in middle life have a higher risk of developing dementia later. If the depression is treated, the risk is reduced.

People in the early and middle stages of dementia also often struggle with depression. In this situation, it is important to take considerable effort to treat it. Prompt treatment may be a significant step in maintaining cognition as well, since those who have both a dementia diagnosis and depression tend to progress much faster than those who do not have depression.

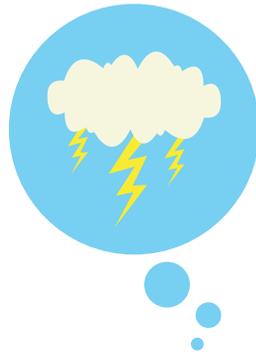


Signs & Symptoms

The signs and symptoms of depression can be obvious or difficult to detect.

They include (but are not limited to):

- Withdrawing from social activities
- Loss of interest in previously enjoyed hobbies or activities
- Difficulty concentrating or paying attention
- Isolation
- Apathy or indifference
- Depressed mood (reports feeling sad, or appears sad/tearful)
- Lack of energy
- Weight gain or weight loss
- Insomnia or excessive sleeping
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Thoughts or conversations about death, dying, or suicide



As a caregiver, if you recognize these signs of depression in your loved one, speak to their primary care doctor to have an assessment done.

Treating the depression may increase their mood and functioning.

Getting a Diagnosis

Your primary care physician may be able to make an initial diagnosis. They may talk to you about treatment options, including anti-depressants, or they may refer to you to a psychiatrist or psychologist.

A psychiatrist is a medical doctor that specializes in diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders, such as depression. They may be recommended by your doctor if you could benefit from anti-depressants, take multiple medications, or are over 65 years old.

A psychologist is a professional who evaluates behavior and mental processes, and are experts in psychotherapy and psychological testing. They may provide individual therapy, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy that can help people reframe their thoughts, manage grief and loss, and use coping skills to manage their mood and emotions.

The best treatment outcomes for depression include a combination of both medication (anti-depressants) and individual therapy. Having both treatments together has been shown to be very effective in alleviating depressive disorders.



Antidepressants

There are many types of anti-depressants available to treat different types of depression. While someone may feel fearful about taking a medication for depression, anti-depressants are considered to be both very safe and effective. Anti-depressants are not addictive, and your body does not become dependent on them.

Many popular antidepressants work by increasing the level of certain neurotransmitters in your brain. Neurotransmitters, such as serotonin or dopamine contribute to elevating mood, increasing our ability to enjoy activities, and decrease irritability.



Antidepressants do not have an instant effect. Most take between 4-6 weeks for the drug to work, and are taken daily. Different people may have a different dosage of medication depending on their age, ethnicity, and type of depression, so you should never share or take someone else's medication, skip a day or take double to make up for a day.

Generally, most antidepressants are tolerated very well with few or no side effects. The most common side effect associated with SSRI antidepressants include interference with sexual functioning. Others have positive side effects, such as an increase in energy or improvement in sleep. Talk to your doctor about the possible side effects and keep in mind that you may or may not experience any or all side effects, but you are very likely to benefit from alleviating depression and increasing mood, functioning, and overall quality of life.

Remember that medications are not a quick fix, and won't help you cope with life's problems, so it's best to explore this option in addition to individual therapy.

Individual therapy

Sometimes called psychotherapy, this proven method for improving mood, decreasing depression and anxiety, and using skills for communication and self-reflection is provided by a licensed mental health professional with specific training in conducting therapy.

Generally, therapy is provided in a therapist office or mental health setting, for approximately one hour, once per week, and is a collaborative relationship in which the therapist and client set goals together of what they want to accomplish.

Signs that you may benefit from therapy:

- You have a sense of hopelessness or helplessness that hasn't gone away for an extended period of time.
- You find it difficult to concentrate or pay attention to carry out work or other activities.
- You are engaging in self-destructive behavior, such as drinking too much alcohol, abusing medications, or other actions that harm yourself or others.
- You worry excessively, expect the worst, are on edge or irritable.

What to Expect?

You may feel nervous about trying therapy, or reluctant to share your thoughts and feelings with a stranger. Therapists use scientifically validated procedures to help people of all ages live happier, healthier, more productive lives. Overcoming your hesitation is worth it.

In psychotherapy, you may engage in some or all of the following:

Talk therapy

You can talk openly in a neutral environment with an objective, non-judgmental person.

Examine your thoughts

You might identify thoughts and thinking patterns that affect your mood and behaviors in positive or destructive ways. Learn new skills: you may learn or practice a new skill with your therapist.

Cope

You may learn new coping skills and strategies to help you deal with changes, symptoms, or situations.

Homework

Your therapist may assign you work to do outside of the therapy session, such as gathering information, journaling thoughts or feelings, reading assignments, or practicing a new skill or habit.

Couples/Family Counseling

Sometimes bringing in others to a therapy session can be a productive and neutral place to discuss a topic or resolve a conflict. You and your therapist will decide together if this is something that might be helpful for you.



What about Confidentiality?

Everything you talk about with your therapist is confidential, with the exception of a few critical situations, such as if you reveal you are planning to hurt yourself or someone else, which the therapist would be legally bound to breach confidentiality.

Your therapist will discuss this exception, and the other situations in which your privacy may not be maintained with you in advance. It is critical to engage fully and honestly in therapy to get the most benefit, and ask questions to address any worries.

A therapist cannot tell your family, spouse, children, or employer about what you talk about in therapy (unless legally mandated). You can choose to give permission to your therapist to share all or some of your discussions with your physician or anyone else if you wish.

Group therapy



Group therapy is a form of therapy that can be done by itself, or along with individual therapy. Group therapy generally focuses on targeting a very specific problem, such as obesity, social anxiety, depression, anger, or grief. A group therapy session may have between five and ten participants, and is different from a support group in that it is led by a mental health professional.

Many times, attending a group therapy can be very rewarding as it allows you to hear others' stories, understand that others have had some of the same experiences as you, and may normalize feelings that you thought only you had.

Groups often become a support and a sounding board for its members, increasing the effectiveness of the therapy. While confidentiality is a group rule, it cannot be guaranteed that other group members will not disclose personal information, so consider the safety of the group before disclosing sensitive information in a group setting.

Depression in Caregivers

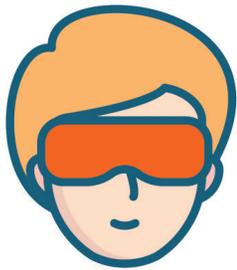
Being a caregiver for a person with memory loss is a difficult job, and the increased stress associated with caregiving may take a toll on a person's mental and physical health. Many caregivers experience depression.

It may present itself in different ways, and include some or all of the following:

- Irritability
- Short-tempered or easily frustrated
- Feelings of hopelessness or helplessness
- Loss of energy
- Physical pain, aches, headaches, or upset stomach not explained by a physical symptom
- Isolation or withdrawal
- Loss of interest in activities
- Difficulty concentrating or paying attention
- Changes in sleeping and eating
- Thoughts of death or suicide

Caregivers are a highly susceptible population when it comes to depression, for several reasons.

Caregiving for a person with dementia can be all consuming. Caregivers may focus so much on the needs of their loved one, they neglect their own health care, doctor's appointments, stress management, diet and exercise routines, and social interactions. They may not feel that there is time for them to get their needs met, or may feel that their needs are less important in light of the constantly changing needs of their loved one.



Caregiver's may not get the sleep they need. Sleep deprivation can contribute to depression and increase your risk for other diseases. Many caregivers struggle with getting enough sleep, especially if they cannot get their loved one to sleep throughout the night, or a new behavior appears that occurs during the night, such as confusion about night and day, attempting to leave the house during the night, or other sleep distress. It is critical for caregivers to get adequate sleep- not only to continue being effective caregivers, but for their own physical and mental health. Sleep deprivation affects your mood, your patience, your ability to think and concentrate, and weakens your immune system.

Just snap out of it.

We get it, you're a Wonder Woman (or Wonder-Man) caregiving machine. You do it all, and there's nothing you can't or wouldn't do for your loved one. Maybe you made commitments or promises to care for someone a certain way, or believe that no one else can give them the kind of care you do. That may be true, to a point. When your physical and mental health is compromised,

you are not doing anyone a service, including yourself.

Your loved one does not demand your care at all costs - at some point, recognize your limitations as a human, and allow professionals to assist in the process.

When you believe you should just "snap out of it" or "get over it" you are dismissing the signs your body is telling you that you also need care and attention. Ignoring your needs will diminish the quality of life for both you and your loved one.

Treatments.

It may be helpful for a caregiver to see a therapist on a regular basis to help cope with ever-changing behaviors and challenges. Your therapist may also suggest that medication might be appropriate and provide additional help in relieving depression. Caregiver support groups have been shown to be very helpful in assisting caregivers with coping, and creating a network of shared resources, ideas, and social interaction. Participating in a support group is a step towards your own self-care, and will help both you and your loved one in the journey.

Conclusion

Depression in people with dementia, or in caregivers, is not uncommon. Left untreated, depression can worsen over time and hasten cognitive decline. In caregivers, depression can lead to health problems, sleep deprivation, panic or anxiety attacks, substance abuse and other detrimental effects. Getting a diagnosis is the first step toward treatment. By getting help for depression when needed, you can help maintain the best possible quality of life for you or your loved one.

The series of Caregiver Books "Caring For A Loved One With Dementia - A Practical Guide for Family Caregivers" was developed by *Alzheimer's Family Center* in Huntington Beach, California thanks to the generous support of the Arthur N. Rupe Foundation.

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