



# Dementia Australia

## Depression: for carers & people with dementia

Most people experience a fluctuation of moods in the course of day to day living. It is normal to feel sad or down in reaction to the problems of life. Depression is not a normal part of ageing. It is a significant illness that affects all aspects of a person's life.

However, a person who has a severe and persistent depressed mood may have a serious illness that requires treatment. No one should have to live with depression.

### Causes of depression

Depression is the most common mental health problem in older people. It is a chemical imbalance in the brain that results from a combination of factors.

Research has shown that normal ageing alters chemicals in the brain leaving an older person vulnerable to mood changes. Depression tends to run in families and is more common in women. Physical illness and the effects of medication can also trigger a depressive illness.

Major life events such as bereavement, relocation to a care facility, physical losses and limited social support and social interaction can predispose an elderly person to developing a depressive illness.

### Symptoms of depression

Older people may not present with clear symptoms of depression. They may complain of physical problems, loss of enjoyment, loss of energy and cognitive changes, rather than feelings of sadness.

The most significant features of depression include:

- Depressed mood or loss of interest in usual activities
- Changes in appetite or weight
- Insomnia or excessive sleeping
- Agitation or lethargic
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Difficult thinking, concentrating or making decisions
- Recurrent thoughts of death, suicidal ideas, plans or attempts
- Deterioration in functioning

It is important to rule out any physical causes of these symptoms before considering depression.

### Depression and Alzheimer's disease

An individual with depression may present with similar symptoms to a person with dementia. Depression can either mimic dementia or worsen symptoms of an existing dementing condition.

Up to 30% of people with Alzheimer's disease may develop depression, especially early in the disorder when they first become aware of cognitive decline.

When a person has depression, they lose interest in their usual activities, experience problems with appetite and sleeping and may neglect their self-care tasks. It is often difficult to differentiate between these symptoms and dementia. Cognitive changes such as difficulty thinking and concentration occur in both depression and dementia.

Cognitive changes in depression usually have a rapid onset and may fluctuate, whereas in dementia, there is a slow or step like deterioration in cognitive abilities.

It is important that the depression is treated, as it can aggravate physical and cognitive decline in a person with Alzheimer's disease.

## **Treatment of depression**

Treatment reflects the biological, psychological and social nature of depression. There are a variety of options ranging from medication, counselling, herbal remedies, meditation, exercise and support groups. A combination of these strategies often gives the best result.

It is important that the person is reviewed by their doctor to exclude physical illnesses and to properly diagnose and treat the depression.

Anti-depressants are highly effective medications that alter chemicals within the brain to improve the person's mood. The vast majority of depressed people respond within a few weeks. It is important to note that medications should be reviewed regularly.

## **How you can help**

There is a direct link between depression and suicide. Take any comments about death or suicide seriously and seek immediate medical assistance from a local doctor, hospital or community health service.

If the person is neglecting to eat or drink, seek immediate medical assistance, ensure you encourage the person to seek medical advice to exclude physical causes and start treatment.

Depression impairs the person's ability to communicate and respond to others. It is often difficult to know what to say to someone who is depressed. Ensure that you treat the person with respect:

- Be patient and understanding
- Listen carefully
- Don't blame the person for their illness
- Explain that depression is a chemical imbalance for which there is effective treatments that can be trialled.
- People who are depressed often feel hopeless and helpless. Show that you have faith in their ability to get better.
- Gently encourage things to help them get better such as attending appointments, medication, meditation, exercises and support groups.
- There are also support groups for friends and relative of people with depression.