



Seniors and Depression

Is depression a normal consequence of aging?

In a word, **NO**. Depression is not a natural part of aging any more than it is a natural part of any other life stage. At any stage of life, it is an illness that requires attention.

What are the causes?

Inherited risk factors – family and genetics

There is a high risk of genetic connection when a relative or family member has a depressive disorder.

Biomedical risk factors

Depression may also stem from other biomedical risk factors such as, thyroid problems, vitamin B-12 deficiency, chronic pain, stroke or Alzheimer's disease. Brain conditions such as epilepsy or migraine headaches and brain injuries from trauma can cause depression as well. Degenerative brain disorders such as Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis or Huntington's disease are commonly associated with depression. Even sleep disorders like sleep apnea (abnormal sleeping pauses during sleep) or narcolepsy (a tendency to fall asleep abruptly during the daytime) can impair mood.

Medications that may cause or contribute to depression

A long list of medications shows depression as a potential side effect. Medications used for neurological or psychiatric conditions can also cause depression. These include the anti-seizure drugs Dilantin (phenytoin) and Tegretol (carbamazepine); Parkinson's disease medications, and sedative drugs such as barbiturates or benzodiazepines.

Recreational drugs and alcohol as depressants

Among those who misuse alcohol and other substances, 15 to 50 percent also have major depression.

Social isolation

Depression is often related to social isolation. Older adults are often more isolated because of a physical illness, lack of

mobility or because they can no longer drive. The highest rates of depression occur among hospitalized seniors and those living in nursing homes. Grief is a common psychological cause for depression in older adults. As people age, they begin to lose friends, relatives and siblings, their social circle gets smaller and they miss loved ones and friends terribly. The most devastating loss to the elderly is the loss of a spouse.

Signs and symptoms of depression

Sometimes depression in the older adult is difficult to pinpoint because it often shares symptoms with other medical conditions. In fact, older adults are more likely to complain about physical problems (aches and pains) rather than emotions.

Suicide

Suicide is five times more likely in individuals over 60 than in younger groups.

- Suicide is more likely to occur in those living alone
- Death of a spouse, other family member or friend is more common in later life than in other age groups and bereavement is highly associated with suicide
- Loss of mobility, functionality, and independence are related to higher suicide rates

Suicidal talk should always be taken seriously and professional help sought immediately.

Getting help for depression

Depression in older people is sometimes harder to recognize than in younger people because it often co-occurs with medical, psychiatric and substance abuse disorders. When an elderly person is diagnosed with depression, it is important for them to realize that it is treatable. Research indicates that the best long term outcomes for the treatment of depression in older adults is medication, therapy and social supports. Whether depression is caused by physical, psychological or social factors, the plan for treatment should address all of them.

The Mood Disorders Association of Ontario provides support, information and education as a complement to traditional and alternative therapies. MDAO services are not intended as a replacement for other treatment options and encourages individuals to seek treatment by a qualified health professional.

Mood Disorders Association of Ontario (MDAO)

36 Eglinton Avenue West, Suite 602, Toronto, Ontario M4R 1A1 Telephone: 416.486.8046 Toll-free: 1.888.486.8236
Fax: 416.486.8127 E-mail: info@mooddisorders.on.ca Website: www.mooddisorders.on.ca

Benefits of treatment

- Partial or complete remission of a broad range of symptoms of depression
- Reduction of pain and suffering associated with physical illness
- Enhancement of general mental, physical and social functioning
- Minimization of cognitive disability

Recommended reading

Living Longer, Living Depression Free – A Family Guide to Recognizing, Treating and Preventing Depression in Later Life.

Miller, Mark D. & Reynolds, Charles F., the John Hopkins University Press, 2002.

Depression and Older Patients, Therapeutic Considerations for the Primary-Care Physician. Continuing Education in Neurology and Psychiatry, vol. 1, number 1, Rabheru, Kiran.

Websites

1. Depression can be Prevented in Seniors
www.ucalgary.ca/mp2003/news/sept03/seniors-depression.html
2. Family Services Association of Toronto – Resources
www.fsatoronto.com/programs/seniors/access.html
3. Aging and Mental Health – www.cmha.ca
Select “Your Mental Health” > “Aging & Mental Health”

GERIATRIC DEPRESSION SCALE

This questionnaire should be completed and given to your healthcare professional.

Name _____ Male Female

Age _____ Date _____

Score one point for each of the following answers.

SCORING:

1. NO 2. YES 3. YES 4. YES 5. NO 6. YES 7. NO 8. YES
9. YES 10. YES 11. NO 12. YES 13. NO 14. YES 15. YES

TOTAL SCORE: _____ (Sum of the above the above answers)

A score between 5 and 9 indicates the strong possibility of depression and a score of 10 or over is almost always indicative of depression.

	YES	NO
1. Are you basically satisfied with your life?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Have you dropped many of your activities and interests?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Do you feel that your life is empty?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Do you often get bored?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Are you in good spirits most of the time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Are you afraid that something bad is going to happen to you?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Do you feel happy most of the time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Do you often feel helpless?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Do you prefer to stay at home, rather than going out?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Do you feel you have more problems with your memory than most?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Do you feel it is wonderful to be alive now?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Do you feel pretty worthless the way you are now?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Do you feel full of energy?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Do you feel your situation is hopeless?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Do you think that most people are better off than you are?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>