



Overview of Depression & the Older Adult

Education for Health Care Professionals

Part 2: Signs & Symptoms



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The Challenges of Recognizing Depression

Recognizing depression in the older person starts with identifying the signs and symptoms.

- Symptoms of depression:
 - may be less obvious in older adults
 - may be masked by symptoms of other chronic diseases
- Sometimes depression will occur for no apparent reason
- The cognitive changes of depression are sometimes wrongly attributed to old age.
- Depression often goes undiagnosed and untreated in older adults who may feel reluctant to seek help.

(APA, 2010)



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Signs & Symptoms of Depression

The following are signs or complaints that may be expressed by an older person with depression:

- not getting dressed
- spending more time alone
- having difficulty concentrating
- losing interest in activities previously enjoyed
- not answering the phone or door
- having unusual outbursts of crying, agitation or anger, or showing little emotion
- appearing confused
- sleeping poorly or too much
- eating more / less than usual
- lacking energy, often tired
- having trouble remembering
- complaining about physical symptoms
- having trouble making decisions or following through with plans
- expressing feelings of worthlessness and sadness
- talking about suicide

(CAMH, 2014)



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Depression and Grief

Depressive symptoms are often present early in the course of grieving and this can be misleading.

- Grief is not a “disorder” and doesn’t require treatment, whereas major depression is a disorder that requires treatment.
- Grief and major depression can occur together, and depression may delay or affect how grief clears or resolves.
- The capacity to be consoled is a consequential distinction between grief and depression.
- In major depression, the predominant mood is sadness marked with hopelessness and despair.

(Pies, 2011)



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Differences Between Grief and Depression

Grief	Depression
Functional Impairment lasts less than 2 months Functioning: "muddles" through	Functional impairment greater than 2 months Functioning: severely impaired
Fluctuating levels of the ability to experience happiness	Relatively fixed feeling of unhappiness
Self esteem intact	Decreased self esteem
Guilt not generalized, focused on the deceased	Guilt generalized
Passively suicidal or not at all	Often actively suicidal

(Pies, 2011)



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Depression & Prescribed Medications

Symptoms of depression can be a side effect of many commonly prescribed drugs. Risk increases with taking multiple medications. Older adults are more sensitive to medications, as the body is less efficient at metabolizing and processing drugs.

Medications that can cause or worsen depression include:	
Blood pressure (Clonidine)	Beta-blockers (Lopressor, Inderal)
Sedatives	Tranquilizers (Valium, Xanax, Halcion)
Estrogens (Premarin)	Parkinson's disease (Domperidone)
Ulcer (Zantac, Prevacid, Losec)	Heart drugs containing reserpine (Hydralazine)
Steroids (Cortisone, Prednisone)	High-cholesterol (Lipitor, Mevacor)
Analgesic & Anti-inflammatory	Calcium-channel blockers (Amlodipine)

(Robinson 2014)



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