Aging and Depression

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The Connection Between Aging and Depression

Retirement. Spending time with grandchildren. Traveling around the world. Relaxing on the sunny beach. Golfing on a weekday. Many aspects of growing old seem very appealing and idyllic. Growing old is an accomplishment – you have survived all the trials and tribulations that the world could throw at you. Not only did you endure, but also you managed to prosper and gain wisdom along the way. Growing old means you have succeeded at life.

For many, though, growing old is not so ideal. Aging brings with it a host of challenges, as your body and your mind transition into another stage of life. Some of the changes are physical, some are social and others are psychological. If the transformations cannot be managed effectively, new and unwanted symptoms will begin to present.

During older adulthood, depression commonly rears its head, even in individuals that have had no previous issues with it. You may find yourself feeling lonely, isolated, sad, anxious and apathetic. You may notice that you are more irritable, or that you do not like yourself as much as you once did.

Perhaps, depression is triggering unexplained aches and pains, or lessening your desire to bathe and get dressed in the morning. To a large degree, these feelings are common and expected, but that does not mean that you should sit idly by and accept them.

Instead of allowing depression to diminish your golden years, work to understand the sources of your depression. Once this is achieved you can begin modifying your life in ways that will relieve symptoms. It is true that the journey will be arduous, but when your quantity of time is limited, you must put emphasis on improving the quality.

Contributing Factors

The changes that occur as you age range from the clear and concrete, like grey hairs emerging from your head, to more hidden changes, like the decreased ability of your brain to produce and absorb the neurotransmitters that fight depression. Recognizing, identifying and understanding these factors allows you react in a manner is more likely to benefit your functioning. Here are some of the biggest factors contributing to depression in older adults.

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Contributing Factors

- **Changing identity –** During your adult life, you have been able to identify yourself as Mark the cop or Judy the teacher, but retirement has taken away your profession. For your entire life you have been able to identify yourself as Tom and Betty’s daughter, but after their passing, you aren’t anyone’s daughter anymore. The identities you have factor tremendously into your self-esteem and self-perception. As you

age, your identity changes, and if you do not find new roles to fill, depression will grow.

- **Changing functioning –** Your hearing has become worse. Your vision has become worse and your memory is not what it used to be. You can't move as quickly as you used to and completing simple tasks is now a great chore. As your abilities decline, depression grows if you cannot accept your new status.
- **Changing habits –** Older adults struggle to maintain the healthy habits that were previously in place. This is often true because many habits were tied to the structure that working supplied. Your day would revolve around your work shift so the eating, sleeping and exercise you did was based on that routine. Your body may struggle to find new balance with the new habits.

- **Grief and loss –** Growing old means watching other people die. This fact is extremely troublesome, but true. From grandparents, to parents, to peers and siblings, to people younger than you, outliving others creates tension. On one hand, you are happy to still be here. On the other hand, you lose because they are no longer positively affecting your life.
- **Changing physical health –** As you age, the risk for serious medical conditions including stroke, cancer, heart disease, MS, lupus and others increase. These physical changes trigger a psychological impact that influences the way you view yourself and your functioning. Under these conditions, depression blossoms.
- **Changing medication –** Because of the new physical health issues listed above, your doctors will be more likely to put you on new medication. These medications can include steroids, ulcer/reflux, anti-anxiety, blood pressure medication and beta-blockers. Even though these medications are useful in treating the intended symptoms, they are known to bring about symptoms of depression.
- **Changing view of mortality –** With the deaths that may seem to become commonplace in your life, it is only a matter of time before you consider your own mortality. Some people will have no problem adjusting to the thought of their own demise while others will struggle. The thought of dying leaves some panicked and depressed.

Next page: depression busters.

Depression Busters

Now that the factors leading to depression have been identified, you can begin working towards reducing the symptoms. Remember, doing nothing is always easier but rarely better. Looking to feel better? Here's how:

- **Prevent and prepare –** Treating a small cut on your hand is much simpler than treating a large, infected wound. Similarly, treating symptoms of depression as they develop is easier and more effective than allowing them to worsen over time. Even if you do not feel symptoms of depression now, find ways to improve your life so that these issues do not present at a later time. Establishing a plan of attack before you need it will leave you better prepared.
- **Identify and accept –** If you have not had previous symptoms of depression, you may be unfamiliar with what to look out for. Paying attention to your mental health may seem difficult at first, but is beneficial. Think about how you are feeling, what kinds of behaviors you are completing (or not completing) and what thoughts are coming to mind. If your thoughts, feelings and behaviors are indicative of depression, don't live in denial. Denial and avoidance of the truth only serve to worsen symptoms because they grow while ignored. Additionally, when left untreated, depression will manifest in other ways, which target your physical health and relationships.
- **Focus on the positive –** How did you envision retirement when you were younger? What did you want to accomplish before you died? Now is your opportunity to complete the things that you never had the time to do. By establishing goals and objectives to accomplish, you give your life a sense of purpose. Goals are something to strive for as they add motivation to your life. Even if the situations have changed, find ways to creatively modify your plans to finish what you started.

- **Professional help –** If depression begins to impact your life, seek out professional support. Therapists and psychiatrists understand what aging involves. They are able to provide you with services specifically designed for you. A psychiatrist will have a good understanding of the other medications you are prescribed to avoid any interactions. Rethink your prior perceptions of therapists. Many older adults see

therapy as unnecessary because people should be able to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” Unfortunately, this view will only stigmatize your own depression. The truth is people get depressed and therapists help. A therapist can also help distinguish between depression and grief. Many times they present in nearly identical ways but require different types of treatment.

- **Support –** As time goes by, death and distance work to reduce your social supports. Without supports, you will experience more loneliness and feelings of isolation. These strengthen depression. Choose a different path by reconnecting with old friends and making new ones. Consider attending a senior center or volunteering. Volunteering helps by adding new social supports while finding a new identity through your activities. Registering for a class could yield a similar result.
- **Pets –** Having something that depends on you and is always happy to see you can be a welcomed addition to your home. Pets are associated with many physical health and mental health benefits. A pet can help you establish a schedule and set a routine. Also, pets can help you get the exercise that becomes more difficult to achieve as you age.

Conclusion

Depression in older adults is a common problem, but not one that has to be accepted without action. Learning about the symptoms and the contributors allows you to gain much needed information about the illness.

With this information, you are able to choose the best course of action to reduce and eliminate your symptoms. With the right strategies, your later years could be the best years of your life.