Using Online Depression Quizzes With Caution

by LANA BARHUM

Diagnosing Depression With an Online Depression Quiz

Google recently announced, in a press release, a new search tool linking to online depression quizzes. The new collaboration with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) responds to your specific Google searches related to depression.

Now, anytime you use Google to search the “word” depression in the United States, you will be given the option to take a standard test for depressive symptoms. But is this an effective and accurate way to diagnose depression or is it making diagnosis even more complicated?

Avoiding Self-Diagnosis

Self-diagnosis, or diagnosis via an internet quiz, can be an easy trap to fall into when you are dealing with depressive symptoms. And while these tests can offer some answers when it comes to what we are feeling, they are no substitute for an expert diagnosis from a licensed therapist or other mental health professional.

Diagnosing depression isn’t as simple as answering some questions online. After all, reporting these symptoms to your doctor is key to diagnosis and understanding the severity of what you are feeling.

Before a medical professional even considers diagnosing someone with depression, they ask questions about low moods, sadness, loss of interest, fatigue and other symptoms of depression and they require more than simple yes or no or multiple-choice answers.

Moreover, most of us aren’t educated enough to understand what is required to make a diagnosis of depression and/or severity of depression. And simply Googling your symptoms or answering a quiz doesn’t mean you are getting the help you need.

The PHQ-9 Depression Scale

The Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) is a nine-item health questionnaire used by mental health professionals to assist in making a diagnosis of depression and treating for it. The nine questions are designed to meet the criteria used for diagnosing major depressive disorder as described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition.

Many of the online quizzes utilize the PHQ-9 nine-item health questionnaire, but the tool wasn’t designed to for self-diagnosis. It was created to be used by medical professionals to determine specific causes of depressed feelings and the severity of those.

Even though it is meant for the diagnosis of a “current major depressive episode,” as noted by one 2012 report in *BMC Psychiatry*, it is also used to rule it out. In other words, it can help in the diagnosis of other mood

disorders.

Depression Is a Complex Disorder

Depression brings with it a whole host of problems, and contributing factors can include anything from stress, addiction, physical and mental health problems and genetic susceptibility.

A diagnosis of depression is based on several factors from age to sex to severity and contributing factors. For example, symptoms in women are different than in men and symptoms in teens are different than those of older adults.

And just as the factors for diagnosing someone with depression are different, so are the factors for treatment. If someone is suffering from severe depression, but has a lot of support from loved ones and doesn't have suicidal thoughts, their treatment is different than someone who has few supportive people in their life and has attempted suicide.

Online tests offer a mere number that tells you if you answered a certain way you are depressed. But for that number to be applicable, it needs to be balanced by the knowledge of a professional who understands all the complexities depression brings with it.

More Tools for Diagnosis by Professionals

The PHQ-9 is not the only tool medical and mental health professionals use for measuring depressive symptoms and making mood disorder diagnoses.

The Quick Inventory of Depressive Symptomatology, Self-Report (QIDS-SR) makes a diagnosis of depression based on a different scoring system and is more specific in its questioning. The Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression (HAM-D) has been used for decades to determine the extent of a person's depression before, during and after treatment.

Relying on an online test alone, even if professionals use it, isn't going to tell you the extent of your depression and what help you need.

Use Online Tests With Caution

Mental health specialists and medical doctors have education, training and expertise that cannot be substituted by an online quiz. Moreover, these professionals are in a better position to correctly and accurately diagnose depression.

While these depression tests are not substitutes for the advice of a medical doctor or mental health professional, they can be useful tools, and they can be helpful for communicating information to your therapist or a medical doctor.

You should always use any information from online quizzes with caution. Even you feel confident about the test result, it is very possible the information is wrong and misdiagnoses can result in serious health problems.

Make sure any information you rely on comes from a credible website. Also, even if you know the website is reliable, make you schedule an appointment with your doctor to confirm or clarify any information received from an online depression test.