

Depression and Dementia

Depression is common among those with dementia. In fact, experts estimate nearly 40% of individuals with Alzheimer's disease suffer from significant depression. However, identifying and diagnosing depression may be difficult because dementia can cause similar symptoms. In addition, individuals with dementia may have a hard time expressing their sadness, hopelessness, guilt, and other feelings associated with depression.

Warning signs of depression:

- Feelings of sadness or unhappiness lasting most of day.
- Declining interest or pleasure in almost all activities.
- Difficulty making decisions or easily distracted.
- Feelings of fatigue, tiredness, and loss of energy almost every day; even small tasks may seem to require much effort.
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt, fixating on past failures, and blaming themselves when things aren't going well.
- Difficulty thinking, concentrating, making decisions, and remembering certain things.
- Experiencing frequent thoughts of death, dying, or suicide.
 - *If having suicidal thoughts or attempts, call 9-1-1 immediately or go to the nearest emergency room.
- Changes in sleep patterns or appetite.

Diagnosis:

There is no single test or questionnaire to detect depression in dementia. Diagnosis requires a thorough evaluation of an individual's medical history, physical and mental examinations, and possibly, interviews with family members by a medical professional.

For an individual to be diagnosed with depression and dementia, he or she must have either depressed mood (sad, hopeless, discouraged, or tearful) or decreased pleasure in usual activities, along with two or more of the following symptoms for two weeks or longer:

- Social isolation or withdrawal
- Disruption in sleep
- Disruption in appetite that is not related to another medical condition
- Agitation or slowed behavior
- Irritability
- Feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness
- Inappropriate or excessive guilt
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Recurrent thoughts of death, suicide plans, or suicide attempt

Because of the complexities involved with diagnosing depression with dementia, it may be helpful to consult a geriatric psychiatrist who specializes in recognizing, diagnosing, and treating depression in older adults.

To locate a list of local providers, contact the Alzheimer's Association, insurance providers, or primary care physician.

Treatment:

Seeking appropriate treatment for depression can significantly improve the quality of life.

The most common form of treatment involves a combination of medicine, counseling, and gradual reconnection to activities and people that bring happiness.

Non-Pharmacological Approaches:

- Attending support groups for individuals who are aware of their diagnosis and prefer to take an active role in seeking help or helping others. Call our 24/7 Helpline at 800.272.3900 to find out about resources in your area.
- Counseling for individuals who are not comfortable in groups. Call our 24/7 Helpline at 800.272.3900 to find out about resources in your area.
- Scheduling a predictable daily routine; taking advantage of the individual's best time of day to undertake difficult tasks.
- Scheduling a list of activities, people, or places that the individual enjoys.
- Exercising regularly, particularly in the morning.
- Acknowledging frustration or sadness, while continuing to express hope that he or she will feel better soon.
- Celebrating small successes.
- Finding the ways in which the individual can be meaningfully involved with their community, friends, and family and being sure to recognize their contributions.
- Providing reassurance that the individual is loved, respected, and appreciated.
- Nurturing the individual with offers of soothing and/or spiritual activities.
- Reassuring the individual that he or she will not be abandoned.

Pharmacological Approaches:

There are several types of antidepressants available to treat depression with dementia. Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) are often used because they have a lower risk for causing interactions with other medications.

As with all medication, be sure to consult with a doctor about the risks, benefits, monitoring, and follow-up needed with each medication.

For additional guidance in coping with caregiving concerns, visit the Alzheimer's Association Caregiver Center (www.alz.org/care) or call the 24/7 Helpline at 800.272.3900.