

Depression is common in older adults, but it's not a normal part of aging

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CTW FEATURES

Experiencing a major life event - change in health, retirement, moving, death in the family - is stressful, but experiencing several of these things in a short span of time can be downright depressing. According to the National Alliance of Mental Illness, depression affects more than 6.5 million Americans aged 65 years or older. Depression in older adults is often undertreated and can go undiagnosed.

"The symptoms of depression in older people seem less severe and are often mixed in with medical conditions," said Dr. Lynn McNicoll, gerontologist and associate professor of medicine at Alpert Medical School at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Consider this: A change in appetite, fatigue and pain are all symptoms of depression, but are also all common side effects of medications and medical conditions.

"The signs and symptoms of depression are often masked by the normal signs of aging," said John Bowen, director of social services at Bethany Village, a continuing care retirement community in central Pennsylvania. For example, your metabolism does slow down as you age, so a shift in appetite and energy level can be expected.

While stress and sadness are



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normal reactions to major life events, those feelings should subside and an individual should adapt and return to their everyday routine and to the activities they enjoy. Those who are depressed, on the other hand, may not be able to cope well with changes.

Signs of depression include ongoing depressed mood, loss of enjoyment, isolation, detachment, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, difficulty concentrating, change in weight or appetite, insomnia (or sleeping more than usual), decline in health and pain. Any change in routine is a red flag, Bowen says.

It's important to note that depression is not weakness, nor should individuals with depression, or their spouses or families, view it as a condition that someone can snap out of easily. It is a medical condition that has emotional, behavioral and physical manifestations.

In addition to depression being complicated to diagnose in older adults, it also heightens the risk of other diseases. Dr. Valentin Bragin, author of "Conquering Depression in the Golden Years" (Langdon Street Press, 2009) and founder of the Stress Relief and Memory Training Center in Brooklyn, New York, noticed that depression seems to heighten the risk of medical illnesses and is often paired with chronic diseases such as diabetes, cancer, high blood pressure and arthritis. He also said that older adults might be affected by vascular depression, a depression caused by inadequate blood flow to the brain.

TREATING DEPRESSION

Like any other age group, medicine and psychotherapy are typically successful treatments. Finding a medication that works can be trickier, because some antidepressants can't be taken with other medications or have side effects that could be dangerous to older adults (forgetfulness or lightheadedness, for example).

Psychotherapy, while conventional to baby boomers, is not conventional for those over 75. It may take more persistence to convince an older person to talk about their feelings, but those that do generally benefit. Psychotherapy is a good way for people to discuss their life, make goals, learn coping skills and, with cognitive therapy, learn how to stop the

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cycle of negativity that affects people with depression.

Aside from prescribed treatments, spouses, family and caregivers can help a depressed loved one focus on reconnecting with the activities, people and things that they respond to and enjoy. For example, if someone has stopped attending church because he or she can't hear, make an appointment with an audiologist. If isolation and loneliness are issues, find a way to get them to a senior center several times a week.

Bragin says that people who have depression benefit from regular exercise. You get an instant mood boost from exercise as it releases endorphins and increases circulation to the brain; plus, it is good for your entire body and takes your mind off things.

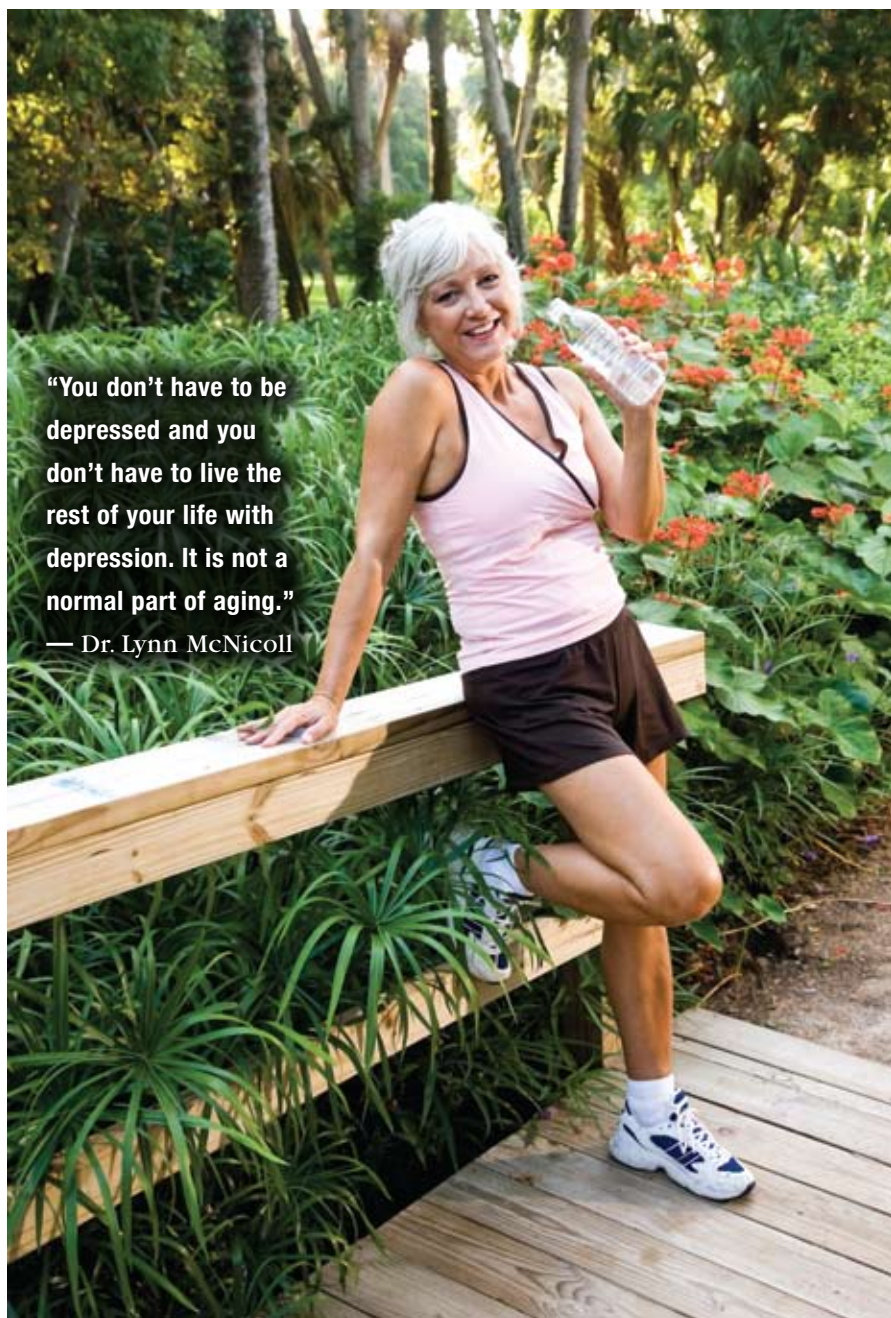
McNicoll recommends finding a senior center for classes, meals, socialization and trips and taking the opportunity to volunteer if you are able.

"You don't have to be depressed and you don't have to live the rest of your life with depression," McNicoll says. "It is not a normal part of aging."

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— Dr. Lynn McNicoll



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