

Depression and Alzheimer's Disease

Do people who have Alzheimer's disease become depressed?

Yes. Depression is very common among people who have Alzheimer's disease. In many cases, they become depressed when they realize that their memory and ability to function are getting worse.

Unfortunately, depression may make it even harder for a person who has Alzheimer's disease to function, to remember things and to enjoy life.

How can I tell if my family member who has Alzheimer's disease is depressed?

It may be difficult for you to know if your family member is depressed. You can look for some of the typical signs of depression, which include the following:

- Not wanting to move or do things (called apathy)
- Expressing feelings of worthlessness and sadness
- Refusing to eat and losing weight
- Sleeping too much or too little

Other signs of depression include crying and being unusually emotional, being angry or agitated, and being confused. Your family member who has Alzheimer's disease may refuse to help with his or her own personal care (for example, getting dressed or taking medicines). He or she may wander away from home more often.

Alzheimer's disease and depression have many symptoms that are alike. It can be hard to tell the difference between them. If you think that depression is a problem for your relative who has Alzheimer's disease, talk to his or her family doctor.

How can the doctor help?

The doctor will talk with your relative. The doctor will also ask you and other family members and caregivers whether the person has any new or changed behaviors. The doctor will check your relative and may wish to do some tests to rule out other medical problems. He or she may suggest medicines to help your family member feel better. The doctor may also have some advice for you and other family members and caregivers on how to cope. He or she may recommend support groups that can help you.

What medicines can help reduce depression?

Antidepressant medicines can be very helpful for people who have Alzheimer's disease and depression. These medicines can improve the symptoms of sadness and apathy, and they may also improve appetite and sleep problems. Don't worry--these medicines are not habit-forming. The doctor may also suggest other medicines that can help reduce upsetting problems, such as hallucinations or anxiety.

What can I do to help my family member?

Try to keep a daily routine for your family member who has Alzheimer's disease. Avoid loud noises and overstimulation. A pleasant environment with familiar faces and mementos helps soothe fear and anxiety. Have a realistic expectation of what your family member can do. Expecting too much can make you both feel frustrated and upset. Let your family member help with simple, enjoyable tasks, such as preparing meals, gardening, doing crafts and sorting photos. Most of all, be positive. Frequent praise for your family member will help him or her feel better--and it will help you as well.

As the caregiver of a person who has Alzheimer's disease, you must also take care of yourself. If you become too tired and frustrated, you will be less able to help your family member. Ask for help from relatives, friends and local community organizations. Respite care (short-term care that is given to the patient who has Alzheimer's disease in order to provide relief for the caregiver) may be available from your local senior citizens' group or a social services agency. Look for caregiver support groups. Other people who are dealing with the same problems may have some good ideas on how you can cope better and on how to make caregiving easier. Adult day care centers may be helpful. They can give your family member a consistent environment and a chance to socialize.

Where can I learn more about caring for my family member who has Alzheimer's disease?

A book called *The 36-Hour Day* (Johns Hopkins University Press; 410-516-6900; www.press.jhu.edu) explains Alzheimer's disease and gives information about resources for caregivers. It gives ideas about things you can do to deal with behavior problems in an Alzheimer's patient. One chapter discusses mood disorders and depression in these patients.

Other Organizations

National Institute on Aging Information Center
<http://www.nih.gov/nia>
800-222-2225

National Mental Health Association
<http://www.nmha.org>
800-969-6642

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill
<http://www.nami.org>
800-950-6264

Alzheimer's Association
<http://www.alz.org>
800-272-3900

Reviewed/Updated: 04/05
Created: 9/00

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.