

RALEIGH GERIATRIC CARE MANAGEMENT



Depression and the Elderly

The difficult changes that many elderly or older adults face—such as the death of a spouse or medical problems—can lead to depression, especially in those without a strong support system. But depression is not a normal or necessary part of aging. In fact, most seniors are satisfied with their lives despite the challenges of growing old.

Left alone, depression not only prevents older adults from enjoying life like they could be, it also takes a heavy toll on health. But if you learn how to spot the signs of depression and find effective ways to help, you or your loved ones can remain happy and vibrant throughout the golden years.

Depression is a problem for many older adults

Loss is painful—whether a loss of independence, mobility, health, your long-time career, or someone you love. Grieving over these losses is normal, even if the feelings of sadness last for weeks or months. Losing all hope and joy, however, is not normal. It's depression.

Although depression in the elderly is a common problem, only a small percentage get the help they need. There are many reasons depression in older adults is so often overlooked. Some assume seniors have good reason to be down or that depression is just part of aging. Elderly adults are often isolated, with few around to notice their distress. Physicians are more likely to ignore depression in older patients, concentrating instead on physical complaints. Finally, many depressed seniors are reluctant to talk about their feelings or ask for help.

The consequences of this oversight are high. Untreated depression poses serious risks for older adults, including illness, alcohol and prescription drug abuse, a higher mortality rate, and even suicide. So it's important to watch for the warning signs and seek professional help when you recognize it. The good news is that with treatment and support, depressed seniors can feel better. No one, whether they're 18 or 80, has to live with depression.

Causes of depression in the elderly

Many elderly adults face significant life changes and stressors that put them at risk for depression. Those at the highest risk include older adults with a personal or family history of depression, failing health, substance abuse problems, or inadequate social support.

Causes and risk factors that contribute to depression in the elderly include:

- **Loneliness and isolation** – Living alone; a dwindling social circle due to deaths or relocation; decreased mobility due to illness or loss of driving privileges.
- **Reduced sense of purpose** - Feelings of purposelessness or loss of identity due to retirement or physical limitations on activities.
- **Health problems** – Illness and disability; chronic or severe pain; cognitive decline; damage to body image due to surgery or disease.
- **Medications** – Many prescription medications can trigger or exacerbate depression.
- **Fears** – Fear of death or dying; anxiety over financial problems or health issues.
- **Recent bereavement** - The death of friends, family members, and pets; the loss of a spouse or partner.

