

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

Don't Let Change Overwhelm You

from the American Counseling Association

Getting older shouldn't mean suffering from depression. Many people find their senior years full of adventure, excitement and a variety of joyful activities.

But all of us, especially as we age, will at some time experience extreme sadness. Changes brought on by aging, such as reduced physical abilities, increased health issues, or being more isolated, can all increase worry and melancholy.

A common cause of sadness, among seniors, is the loss of someone dear to us, whether a spouse, a relative or a close friend. The grief we experience over such a loss is actually a natural, healthy response that helps us face the future.

Grieving becomes a problem when it keeps a person from enjoying life in general. There's no clear timetable for how long grief should endure. For some people there may be a sad week or two, and for others it might take months to accept a loss. But when that grieving seems unending, it's actually depression. It's not always an easy condition to recognize.

However, there are signs that indicate when grief has crossed over to depression. The most noticeable is that the pain seems to be unrelenting, refusing to diminish with the passage of time.

It's also telling when all signs of joy in the person's life seem to be gone. He or she can't laugh at a funny joke, doesn't brighten in response to a hug, and can't appreciate the beautiful things around them, such as a pretty sunset or a young grandchild.

Someone suffering from depression is often tired all the time, stops being interested in friends and favorite activities, and may withdraw socially. Eating and sleeping problems are common, and increased use of alcohol or drugs can occur.

If you, or someone close to you, has experienced a painful, heartbreaking loss and is beginning to exhibit signs of hopelessness, it is important to get help quickly. Depression can not only negatively affect health, but is a common cause of suicide.

There are a number of tests that can help pinpoint depression, along with a variety of methods for treating it. A family physician or professional counselor can offer advice on how to approach the problem. Depression is not a mental health issue that simply goes away or that will cure itself. Seek help quickly.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcornet@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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