

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

Don't Let Depression Sneak Up On You

from the American Counseling Association

Depression is a serious health issue, yet often its warning signs are ignored. Not acknowledging the symptoms of depression not only means the person's day-to-day life is being affected in many negative ways, but it can also have a significant impact on physical health issues, including cancer and diabetes.

Today, we know that depression is a mental health condition with clear symptoms. We also know that it's a condition that can be treated. Most importantly, when left untreated it can often worsen, affect most aspects of a person's life, and may even become life-threatening.

While each of us will feel a bit down and sad at various times, there is often a cause for such sadness, and these feelings are usually short-lived.

Clinical depression, on the other hand, is much more serious and longer lasting. There may not be a clear situation or event that brought it on. And depression tends to be long lasting. The general rule is that when someone is suffering from two or more of the symptoms of depression, and these symptoms persist for two weeks or more, it's a sign of a problem that needs professional treatment.

And what are the signs of depression? They include a variety of symptoms:

- changes in sleep or eating patterns;
- strong feelings of sadness, guilt, hopelessness, or worthlessness;
- loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies, favorite sports, time with loved ones, and sex;
- trouble concentrating or making decisions;
- a general lack of energy for no real reason;
- frequent negative thoughts, such as "I'm no good," "I can't do anything right"; and
- thoughts of death or suicide.

It's estimated that in any given year more than 15 million Americans suffer from depression, yet far too few seek early treatment. Many people are ashamed to admit they are having a mental health problem, however, they would not hesitate to see a health professional if they were in severe physical pain.

Depression can also make someone withdrawn, tired and simply unable to admit there's a problem and to seek professional help. But it's important to do so, and critical for family and friends to offer encouragement, not criticism, about seeking help. Talking to your doctor or a professional counselor is a first step in understanding and treating this all too common mental health issue.

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

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