

Mental Illness in Older Adults: An Opportunity for Spiritual Growth

Background

Depression is not a normal part of the aging process. Everyone feels sad or “blue” from time to time. But growing older involves adjusting to life changes that often involve loss: of loved ones, of familiar routines, of physical health. Depression is the most common emotional disorder in older adults, occurring in about one in seven people over 65. The symptoms of clinical depression can be overlooked and untreated when they coincide with other medical illness and life events.

Clinical depression is not a moral or spiritual failure. It is not the normal feelings that accompany grief. It is a serious medical illness that should be treated at any age. The good news is that clinical depression is one of the most treatable of all mental illnesses. More than 80% of people with depression can be treated successfully with medication, psychotherapy and a supportive community of family and friends.

In the Bible, growing older is seen as the positive fulfillment of a life devoted to God. The blessings and responsibilities of aging are to be celebrated and shared with others.

Less than 3% of persons aged 65 and older receive treatment from mental health professionals. Symptoms of depression often co-occur with other medical illnesses such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, Parkinson’s disease and cancer.

Many older adults do not see depression as a health issue and feel like they can “handle it themselves.” The result is that clinical depression is often not diagnosed which dramatically affects a person’s quality of life.

Common Symptoms of Depression

Many well-intentioned physicians sometimes overlook the signs of late-life depression. This is because some of the symptoms seen in young people are less apparent or absent in older adults. The classic signs of depression include:

- ◆ feelings of sadness;
- ◆ an inability to experience pleasure;
- ◆ early morning awakenings; multiple awakenings throughout the night;
- ◆ decreased or increased appetite;
- ◆ inability to concentrate;
- ◆ indecisiveness;
- ◆ feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt;
- ◆ decreased energy; motor disturbances; and
- ◆ recurrent thoughts of death.

A person who suffers some or all of these symptoms nearly every day for more than two weeks may be experiencing clinical depression.

Older adults with depression may not always display these classic signs but instead may show signs of dementia, complain of bodily aches and pains, or feel agitated, anxious, or irritable. Because many symptoms of depression are seen as part of other ailments or ignored altogether, an assessment by an informed mental health professional is essential.

How Faith Communities Can Respond

Older adults are America’s only growing natural resource. Most of us can look forward to living many years after reaching the age of retirement. In the Bible, growing older is seen as the positive fulfillment of a life devoted to God. The blessings and responsibilities of aging are to be celebrated and shared with others.

Our faith communities have a unique ability to meet the needs of an aging population because many older persons have been active members of a faith community. Being a part of a caring community is a way for people to stay connected, affirmed and adults and valued as a child of God. Worship, rituals, Bible Study and prayer can help older adults address the spiritual issues of the meaning and purpose of life.

Congregations can offer a variety of services and programs to encourage on-going spiritual growth.

- ✓ Educate about mental illnesses in all age groups.

- ✓ Encourage intergenerational programs that benefit persons of all ages.
- ✓ Train visitation ministers, parish nurses and other persons in ministry to recognize the symptoms of grief, depression and other physical, material and emotional needs.
- ✓ Provide opportunities for senior adults to share their stories and unique life experiences by involving them in the life of the community as teachers, mentors and volunteers.
- ✓ Offer classes and groups that promote physical fitness, mental stimulation and opportunities for strengthening the spiritual life.
- ✓ Provide specialized program such as offering transportation to worship services and other events being sensitive to special needs like mobility and hearing.
- ✓ Provide meals taking into consideration special diets, texture, taste, delivery or other special needs.
- ✓ Address respite care for caregivers with educational programs and volunteer time out support.
- ✓ Consider having an outreach ministry to persons living alone or in retirement communities.

Aging as a Spiritual Journey

The most significant transition in the aging years is from a life of productivity in goods and services to a life valued for itself. This transitional shift invites us into the gift of aging.

James W. Ewing, Ph. D.

Changes, losses and transitions can lead us into anxiety and despair or they can open up new opportunities for spiritual growth. In the process of letting go of the familiar, we can choose to embrace our vulnerability and be open to exploring and deepening our spiritual life. We can choose to live in the "sacred now" where every moment is fresh and new.

Aging allows us the time to cultivate a deeper connection with our true inner self, with people we care about and with God. Aging is an opportunity to explore the core values that give meaning, value and purpose to our lives. Freedom from many responsibilities gives us time to choose how we want to share our wisdom and gifts with others.

Persons who have a sense of purpose and feel connected to others, regardless of their age, are less likely to struggle with depression and other mental health issues. Good mental health is ageless!

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*Older persons need a dream,
not only a memory*
(Abraham Herschel)

Rev. Susan Gregg-Schroeder
Coordinator of Mental Health Ministries

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