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## Mature adults and depression: how you can help

by Paul Holbrook, M.A., C.S.C.S.

Although depression is not considered a normal part of aging, this illness is common among older adults. According to the American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry, 15% of adults ages 65 and above experience symptoms of depression that cause them distress and make it hard for them to function.

Depression also influences the physical and mental health of older adults, say researchers from the Seattle-based University of Washington. Their study of the healthcare costs associated with depression shows that mature adults with significant depressive symptoms had healthcare costs about 50% higher than older individuals without depression. (1) According to the researchers, "This increase was seen for every component of healthcare costs and was not accounted for by an increase in specialty mental healthcare."

"Population ageing is projected to aggravate the magnitude of mental health problems," (2) says the World Health Organization (WHO). Currently the fourth leading cause of premature death and disability worldwide, depression is expected to become the second leading cause by 2020, according to WHO. (3)

Many studies in the last decade have looked at the effects of exercise on depression. This research found that exercise enhances self-esteem, improves mood, reduces anxiety levels, increases the ability to handle stress and improves sleep patterns. (4,5,6) In addition, a recent study suggests that exercise may be an effective antidote to major depression.

Investigators from Duke University Medical Center tested exercise against the antidepressant Zoloft® in 156 outpatients



ages 50 and older who met the criteria for a major depressive disorder. The team discovered that both treatments had about the same ability individually (or combined) to reduce or eliminate symptoms. Exercise also did a better job of keeping symptoms from coming back after the depression lifted.

If you're an industry professional who works one on one with older adults, you can help depressed clients feel better by helping them through physical activity and through giving them your undivided attention.

Physical activity breaks down barriers, freeing older adults to express their feelings or talk about the distresses in their lives. It's important for you to be an engaged listener when your clients feel safe enough to open up. If you listen with your full attention, you'll draw your mature clients out and encourage individuals to express their emotions freely.

You can promote these interactions by selecting exercises that help you maintain good eye contact. For example, avoid using any exercise in which your eye level is higher

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than a mature client's, i.e. a position in which the person lies on his or her back. This position can discourage the free flowing interaction between the individual and you. Constantly assess your position, adjusting it when necessary by standing or kneeling to keep eye-level contact.

Here is a list of helpful ideas for listening to older adults:

1. **Stop talking.** Resist giving advice and limit your talking. You can't listen while you talk.
2. **Empathize.** Try to put yourself in the mature adult's place, so you can see or understand the person's perspective.
3. **Don't give up too soon.** Be patient; don't interrupt.
4. **Concentrate on what the client says.** Actively focus your attention on words, ideas and feelings related to the subject.
5. **Look at the person.** Focus both eyes intently on one of your client's eyes, rather than shifting your focus from eye to eye. You'll be amazed at what you see and learn.
6. **Leave your emotions behind.** Try to push your worries, fears and problems outside the interaction.

By using the right exercise intensity levels, you will help break down barriers and create open communication between you and your clients. Then, with your best effort and intention, you can engage these mature adults with your full attention. This combination of exercise and attention will help your mature clients feel less depressed, better about themselves and better able to reevaluate and think more clearly about issues.

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## Recognize the signs of depression

Depression is a biological illness that affects behavior, thoughts and feelings. It is manifested as an intense feeling of sadness that may follow a loss or other traumatic event, but is out of proportion to that event and persists beyond an appropriate length of time.

Eran Metzger, M.D., a psychiatrist at Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for Aged, says most people get the blues now and then, but are not depressed. He says the following signs can indicate depression:

- Persistent sadness, anxiety or an empty feeling;
- Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, guilt or worthlessness;
- Decreased energy and fatigue;
- Restlessness and irritability;
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions;
- Loss of interest in pleasurable activities; or
- Persistent thoughts of suicide or death.

Dr. Metzger says that depression can be successfully treated with antidepressant medications, psychotherapy and self-help (e.g. meditation, relaxation techniques, support groups). In addition, he says that developing a hobby, staying involved with activities that keep mind and body active, and keeping in touch with family and friends are all proven ways of keeping major depression at bay. The good news, Dr. Metzger adds, is that once depression has been recognized and treatment sought, symptoms will lessen. About 60–80% of people diagnosed with depression are treated successfully outside the hospital.

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