

# Why aren't things getting better ?

## *Understanding depression in women*

During the course of a typical lifetime, as many as one in five women may suffer a depressive episode (breast cancer strikes one in nine). This means that approximately twenty (20%) percent of women will suffer from some form of depression, compared to an estimated ten (10%) percent of men. This ratio holds true regardless of race, ethnic background or economic status.

Of the twenty percent of women that suffer from depression, only one-fifth of them seek professional assistance. Research indicates that approximately 12 million women suffer from a depressive episode during a typical year. With proper treatment, 80% of the symptoms can be alleviated.

Why women have more occurrences than men of depressive episodes is not completely understood; however, there are several factors that may be responsible for the difference.

According to research by the American Academy of Family Physicians, the diagnostic criteria for depression is the same for men and women. Women with

depression reported experiencing more guilt, anxiety, increase sleep and appetite, weight gain and eating disorders.

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), recognizes three primary types of depression that affect both women and men, they include:

**Major depression** - Also known as clinical depression. Women have some or all the symptoms of depression for at least 2 weeks up to several months. Individual episodes can occur once, twice or several times in a lifetime.

**Dysthymia** - Women experience the same symptoms as major depression but the symptoms are milder and last at least two years.

**Manic depression** - Also known as bipolar depression. It is the least common form of depression each year. Symptoms are the same as major depression but along with the major depression are episodes of euphoria, irritable excitement or mania. Typically, this is the only form of depression in which the same number of men and women suffer.

## What are the risk factors?

The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology recognizes the following risk factors in women:

- Family history of mood disorders
- Personal past history of mood disorders in early reproductive years
- Loss of a parent before the age of 10 years
- Childhood history of physical or sexual abuse
- Use of an oral contraceptive, especially one with a high progesterone content
- Use of gonadotropin stimulants as part of infertility treatment
- Persistent psychosocial stressors (e.g., loss of job)
- Loss of social system or the threat of such a loss

While these factors represent a potential risk, they are not a guarantee that a woman will have an episode of depression. Being aware of and understanding the risk factors for depression can help a woman to better recognize the condition and seek treatment more quickly.

The rate of depression in women seems to begin at the time of adolescence. It remains high from around age 18 to 44

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years. Oddly, the condition seems to lessen overall from ages 45 to 65, yet becomes more common in women over age 65. Research continues to attempt to determine why this change in depression between these certain ages. It is important to note that women can suffer depression throughout life and should not ignore symptoms because of age.

## **What can cause a depressive episode?**

Depression is believed to be caused by certain chemicals in the brain nerve cells that work slower than necessary. The slow down of these brain nerve cells is the result of some brain chemicals being too low.

NIMH reported in the Journal of Affective Disorders that women may suffer more from depression than men because of differences in the biochemistry and childhood socialization that may render women more prone to have episodes of depression. The original NIMH study found that only twenty (23) percent of the women who could benefit from treatment were receiving professional care.

## **Why do women have more depressive episodes?**

There are several potential factors that may be at the root of the higher number of depressive episodes in women. The following is a list of the most agreed upon factors.



**Genetics.** If a family member has a mood disorder, there is a greater likelihood that the female family member will have the same condition.

**Hormonal factors.** Since there seems to be an increase in the potential for a depressive episode in adolescents after the onset of puberty, scientists believe that changes in the body's hormones have at least an influence on depressive episodes.

**PMS & Menstruation.** During a woman's monthly cycle, there are numerous hormonal changes which can cause a depressive like condition; however, usually these symptoms are light and do not require professional care unless they become severe.

**Sexual or physical abuse.** According to the American Psychiatric Association, at least thirty-seven (37) percent of women age 21 and younger have had a significant experience of sexual or physical abuse. This can be an overwhelming experience and has the possibility to trigger a depressive episode. Abuse can lead to a low self-esteem, helplessness, social isolation and self-blame.

**Post-Childbirth.** There are several occurrences of depressive episodes after childbirth. Hormonal changes are again suspected; however, pregnant women have the lowest occurrence of depression of any group.

**Negative life events.** Daily stresses,

death of a loved one, divorce and unemployment all seem to have some role in triggering a depressive episode.

**Self-Esteem.** Women with a low self-esteem, or self-image seem to be more prone to bouts of depressive episodes.

#### **What are some of the symptoms of a depressive episode in women?**

Clinical depression occurs when a group of symptoms lasts for more than two (2) weeks. According to Dr. Martha Manning, Ph.D., the symptoms in women of depression can include:

- Feelings of persistent sadness, worthlessness, guilt
- Difficulty concentrating, organizing thoughts, remembering
- Fatigue, loss of connection with past interests
- Marked changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- Loss of interest in sex
- Disconnection from loved ones
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Persistent physical complaints for which no other medical reason can be found

In adolescent girls, the condition may have more subtle symptoms. Many adolescent girls are more reserved, whose symptoms may include problems with school or eating. Others may have a distorted view of her body, a general lack of satisfaction and a feeling of unhappiness with herself and life in general.

Elderly women may not have any behavioral disturbances or even admit that they are unhappy or depressed. Instead, the condition seems to have symptoms that include chronic pain, digestive problems and/or headaches.

Many times depression does not occur alone. Other behavioral or physical conditions occur in conjunction with the depressive state. These additional conditions can be a combination of depression and anxiety, eating disorders, migraines, heart disease or diabetes.

#### **What needs to be done if I think I am depressed?**

In a recent study by the National Mental Health Association, more than one half of all women believe that depression is a normal part of getting older. Of that same survey group, more than half of the total number of women used denial of the condition while forty-one (41) percent cited embarrassment or shame as a significant barrier to seeking treatment. This factor is disheartening because the results of proper treatment can recover significant portions of an individual's life.

Depression is a treatable condition. It is important that if you suspect that you or someone you love is suffering from depression, then please contact the CARELINE at (800) 662-1002, for a confidential evaluation and assessment. There are several treatment options available, from hospitalization to attending an education support group. The CARELINE nursing staff can help

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## Recognizing The Signs and Symptoms of Depression

According to the American Psychiatric Association, professional help should be sought if you or someone you love has at least four or more of the following symptoms for more than two weeks, they include:

Noticeable change in appetite, weight gain or significant weight loss not attributable to dieting

Noticeable change in sleeping patterns, such as fitful sleep, inability to sleep, early morning awakening or sleeping too much

Loss of interest and pleasure in activities formerly enjoyed

Persistent sad, anxious or empty mood

Feeling of hopelessness, pessimism

Restlessness, irritability

Decreased energy, fatigue, being slowed down

Feeling of worthlessness

Feelings of inappropriate guilt

Inability to concentrate or think, indecisiveness

Recurring thoughts of death or suicide, wishing to die or attempting suicide (Anyone with this symptom should receive treatment immediately)

Overwhelming feelings of sadness and grief, waking two hours earlier than usual each morning, feeling more depressed in the morning and moving significantly more slowly

Physical symptoms such as headaches, digestive disorders and chronic pain

## Are You Suffering from Depression?

The following self-test is an adoption of the Goldberg Depression Inventory. Answer the following questions based on your experiences during the past week.

- (1) Not at all
- (2) Just a little
- (3) Somewhat
- (4) Moderately
- (5) Very much

- \_\_\_ I do things slowly
- \_\_\_ My future seems hopeless
- \_\_\_ It is hard for me to concentrate on reading
- \_\_\_ The pleasure and joy has gone out of my life
- \_\_\_ I have difficulty making decisions
- \_\_\_ I have lost interest in aspects of life that used to be important to me
- \_\_\_ I feel sad, blue and unhappy
- \_\_\_ I am agitated and keep moving around
- \_\_\_ I feel fatigued
- \_\_\_ It takes great effort for me to do simple things
- \_\_\_ I feel that I am a guilty person who deserves to be punished
- \_\_\_ I feel like a failure
- \_\_\_ I feel lifeless - more dead than alive
- \_\_\_ My sleep has been disturbed too little, too much, or broken sleep
- \_\_\_ I spend time thinking about how I might kill myself
- \_\_\_ I feel trapped or caught
- \_\_\_ I feel depressed even when good things happen to me
- \_\_\_ Without trying to diet, I have lost or gained weight

Total Score = \_\_\_\_\_

Use the following scale to determine the potential level of depression you may be suffering from.

- |              |                                      |
|--------------|--------------------------------------|
| 0 to 9       | No depression likely                 |
| 10 to 17     | Possibility of developing depression |
| 18 to 21     | Borderline depression                |
| 22 to 35     | Mild to moderate depression          |
| 36 to 53     | Moderate to severe depression        |
| 54 or higher | Severely depressed                   |

Any total score over 21 needs to be brought to the attention of a behavioral health care professional to determine what level of treatment may be able to help.