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April 2011

Depression in Women

I've been feeling very low and hopeless for a few months and can't seem to turn my mood around. My husband thinks I may be depressed, but I've always thought that was just something people said when they felt sad. Could I actually be depressed?

Depression is a serious condition that can impact every area of your life. It can affect your social life, your family relationships, your career, and your sense of self-worth and purpose. And for women in particular, depression is common.

Women experience depression twice as often as men, and according to the National Mental Health Association, approximately 12 million women in the United States experience clinical depression each year. And, as many as 1 in every 4 is likely to experience an episode of major depression at some point in life. But the good news is that depression is treatable, and the more you understand about depression, the more equipped you will be to tackle the condition head on.

Depression is a serious and pervasive mood disorder. It causes feelings of sadness, hopelessness, helplessness and worthlessness. Depression can be mild to moderate with symptoms of apathy, little appetite, difficulty sleeping, low self-esteem and low-grade fatigue. Or, it can be major depression with symptoms of depressed mood most of the day, diminished interest in daily activities, weight loss or gain, insomnia or hypersomnia (oversleeping), fatigue, feelings of guilt almost daily, and recurring thoughts of death or suicide.

Experts believe that the increased chance of depression in women may be related to changes in hormone levels that occur throughout a woman's life. These changes are evident during puberty, pregnancy and menopause, as well as after giving birth, having a hysterectomy, or experiencing a miscarriage. In addition, the hormone fluctuations that occur with each month's menstrual cycle probably contribute to premenstrual syndrome (PMS) and premenstrual dysphoric disorder, or PMDD - a severe syndrome marked especially by depression, anxiety, cyclical mood shifts and lethargy.

Before adolescence, the rate of depression is about the same in girls and boys. However, with the onset of puberty, a girl's risk of developing depression increases dramatically to twice that of boys.

Many women face additional stresses of work and home responsibilities, caring for children and aging parents, abuse, poverty, and relationship strains. It remains unclear why some women faced with enormous challenges develop depression, while others with similar challenges do not.

The symptoms of depression in women include:

- Persistent sadness
- Anxiety
- "Empty" mood
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities, including sex
- Restlessness
- Irritability



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Symptoms continued:

- Excessive crying
- Feelings of guilt
- Worthlessness, helplessness and hopelessness
- Pessimism
- Sleeping too much or too little and early-morning awakening
- Appetite and/or weight loss or overeating and weight gain
- Decreased energy, fatigue or feeling "slowed down"
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts.
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders and chronic pain

Depression can also coexist with other serious medical illnesses, such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, thyroid problems and multiple sclerosis, and may even make symptoms of the illness worse. Studies have shown that both women and men who have depression in addition to a serious medical illness tend to have more severe symptoms of both illnesses. They also have more difficulty adapting to their medical condition, and more medical costs than those who do not have coexisting depression. Research has shown that treating the depression, along with the coexisting illness, will help ease both conditions.

If you or someone you know is depressed, the first and most important thing you can do is get an appropriate diagnosis and begin treatment. You may need to help someone make an appointment and possibly go with her to see the doctor. Encourage her to stay in treatment, or seek different treatment if no improvement occurs after six to eight weeks. In addition, you can also offer emotional support, understanding, patience and encouragement.

COMCARE of Sedgwick County is a licensed Community Mental Health Center. You may contact COMCARE at 316-660-7540 and talk with a qualified professional about a variety of methods used to treat depression, including medications such as antidepressants and psychotherapy. You and your mental health care provider will determine the best course of treatment for you.