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Depression is Not Part of Growing Older

I am proud to say that I am turning 81 years young next month. I have remained active throughout my retirement, but lost my husband whom I was married to for 60 wonderful years last year and I miss him. I have tried to keep my mind busy, but have slowly lost interest in all the activities I used to participate in. I would rather stay home and rest. My energy levels just aren't the same. Is this just part of growing old?

Everyone has experienced a period of sadness during his or her lifetime. Sometimes these feelings of sadness are in response to something that has happened such as the loss of a loved one or experiencing a difficult time. But, there is a difference between feeling sad in response to a life event and experiencing a clinical depression. Depression is not just "feeling blue" or feeling grief after a loss. Depression is a feeling of sadness that lasts for many weeks and does not go away. Depression interferes with your daily activities and often includes changes in sleep, appetite, and a general loss of energy.

Depression is a common illness that affects millions of Americans each year, but it is a treatable illness. Depression is caused by an imbalance in brain chemicals. Men and women of all ages, genders, races, ethnic groups, and economic status can experience depression. Famous people, including actors, successful business people, and politicians have spoken out about their experiences with late-life depression.

The symptoms of depression in older persons differ from those experienced by young persons or those in midlife. The signs that an older person may be suffering from depression include the inability to sleep, memory problems, confusion, withdrawal from social events, and irritability. Other risk factors for late-life depression include gender (women are more likely to suffer from late-life depression than men), being single (especially widowed), and lack of friends (living alone at home with few outside contacts with other people).

As we age, there are life events that can trigger a clinical depression. Physical health conditions such as heart attack, stroke, hip fracture, bypass surgery, and macular degeneration are often associated with the development of depression. Hormonal changes in women have been shown to trigger depression. Increased alcohol or drug use (including over-the-counter medications) may lead to a clinical depression. Certain medications prescribed by your physician or a combination of medications can cause a clinical depression. Medicines prescribed for pain, high blood pressure, and arthritis; hormonal treatments; and tranquilizers can result in a change in brain chemicals to trigger a clinical depression.

If you have become worried that you feel "low" or your changes in sleep patterns are disrupting your normal activities, you should seek help. Some of your friends may have told you that your feelings are normal for someone your age, or that depression is expected as you experience physical limitations in life. This is not true. Depression is not a normal function of aging. Please don't be afraid to ask for help. Contact your family, your medical doctor or a mental health professional who can help you start feeling better. When you feel sad over a period of time, it is time to seek treatment.