

# Depression and Alzheimer's Disease

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## **What is depression and how does it relate to Alzheimer's Disease?**

Depression is a condition that affects a person's mood and is characterized by feelings of sadness and hopelessness. The National Alzheimer's Association estimates that up to 40% of people with Alzheimer's disease (AD) suffer from significant depression. This is somewhat higher than the estimated 15% to 20% of older adults in the general population that have experienced depression.

## **What are the causes of depression in people with AD?**

There are many different causes of depression. Often dementia itself can lead to depression, particularly in the early stages of the disease. Other possible causes of depression may include medication side effects, some medical conditions, coping with a serious illness, stressful life transitions such as a recent move or loss of a spouse, or a family history of depression.

## **What are the symptoms of depression?**

Many of the symptoms of depression are similar to the symptoms of AD and other dementias. Common symptoms include:

- Consistently depressed mood
- Decreased pleasure in usual activities
- Agitation
- Irritability
- Withdrawal or loss of interest in social activities
- Overeating or lack of appetite, resulting in significant weight gain or weight loss
- Sleep disturbances
- Unexplainable aches and pains

- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness
- Recurrent thoughts of death

People with AD may have experienced one or two of these symptoms. However if they are experiencing three or more symptoms and they last for more than two weeks, it is important to consult a doctor.

### **How is depression diagnosed?**

Because the symptoms of depression are similar to those of dementia, making a diagnosis can be difficult. It is important to consult a doctor to evaluate the depression in order to establish a treatment plan. Evaluation usually involves interviews with the person with dementia and their family members, a physical examination and mental status tests. Evaluation may identify a medical condition or medication causing the symptoms of depression. In some instances, the skills of a specialist such as a geriatric psychiatrist or a neurologist specializing in Alzheimer's disease may be recommended.

### **What are the options for treatment of depression?**

Depression is highly treatable. The first step is correcting any underlying medical conditions.

Medication is commonly used for the treatment of depression. There are several different types and brands of medications, and it is important to work with a doctor to find the medication that works best. Medications may help to improve mood, appetite and sleep patterns. Most medications take up to 12 weeks before the beneficial effects are noticeable.

Psychological therapy can also be very helpful in treating depression. The person with depression may find relief in talking with a therapist or counselor about their experience and feelings.

Community Resources, such as support groups, can also be helpful -- particularly for people with early-stage AD. A support group allows the person to talk to others who are experiencing similar feelings and emotions.

Environmental changes can also be made by the family and caregivers to improve the mood of the person with depression. Examples include:

- A consistent daily routine
- Regular exercise
- Reducing bright lights, loud noises and other sources of over stimulation
- Activities or visits with friends and family
- Positive feedback and reassurance

Different treatments work for different people. For some people joining a support group and making simple changes in their daily routine may be helpful. For others, a combination of medication and psychological therapy is best. The good news is that people usually feel better when they find the right treatment.

## **Additional Resources**

Additional resources regarding depression and dementia can be found at:

- [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org) or 1-800-272-3900
- [www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov) or 1-800-438-4380
- [www.med.umich.edu/depression/](http://www.med.umich.edu/depression/) or 1-800-475-6424

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