How to Recognize and Address the Signs of Depression in Your Aging Parent

By Nancy Kupka PhD, RN, Walgreens, for Mental Health America

You hear a lot of buzz in the news about depression among adolescents and new mothers, but you don’t hear much about depression among older individuals. After all, as they grow older, people develop new health problems, become less physically active and more socially isolated, so it’s normal to get a little depressed — right? Actually, no, that’s not right. Depression is a common problem among older adults, but it’s not a normal part of aging. Rather, it’s a serious medical condition that requires attention and if deemed appropriate, professional help. You can help your aging parent recognize the signs of depression and get help.

What’s Happening at NAMI GC?

NAMI Greater Cleveland (NAMI GC) ushered in the New Year with a flurry of activity. On January 2, we welcomed our newest co-worker, Alberto Martir. Since stepping into the role of Peer Support Specialist, Alberto has been meeting support group leaders and visiting with support group members. In addition, he is overseeing the Hospital Network Program volunteers at the Cleveland Clinic, Highland Springs Hospital, MetroHealth, and University Hospitals. Alberto is looking forward to meeting all of our stakeholders in the coming months.

In mid-January, we were literally on the move. We relocated our offices on the 6th floor of the United Bank Building to the 7th floor. Our new space affords offices for each staff member, additional work stations for volunteers and interns, and dedicated areas for storage. I am pleased to report that we are settling in, and the dust is beginning to settle. We are grateful to the ADAMHS Board of Cuyahoga County for making this space available to us.

The next time you visit the NAMI GC offices, please stop at the security desk on the 6th floor to sign in. The security guard will then advise us of your arrival, and we will accompany you to the 7th floor.

Financial advisors often say, “As goes January, so goes the year.” If that holds true for NAMI GC, we will have many exciting initiatives to share with you. Stay tuned.

Symptoms of Depression in Older People

Almost 5 percent of Americans over the age of 50 experience at least one major depressive episode per year, similar to the rate among younger Americans. But these signs may be different in older adults than in young people. For some older adults, the symptoms of depression may be subtler than just feelings of sadness. Even health care providers can miss symptoms of depression in their older patients, as shown by the small number of referrals from primary care providers to geriatric care and mental health care providers.

This list, adapted from the National Institute of Mental Health and the National Institute on Aging, identifies some of the warning signs associated with depression among older individuals:

- Noticeable changes in mood; feeling distant from others, flat, empty or anxious
- Changes in energy level; feeling tired all the time but having trouble sleeping, or sleeping too much
- Difficulty concentrating; feeling restless or on edge
- Irritability, anger or lashing out at others
- Increased worry or stress or obsess-
Getting Older Veterans Proper Care

This article was posted on NAMI's blog by Colleen O'Day on Nov. 09, 2018

In an era of ongoing armed conflict, the impact of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is more widely recognized than it was 40 years ago when veterans were knee-deep in the atrocities of the Vietnam War. In fact, PTSD wasn’t even recognized as a mental illness until 1980.

While the disorder is more visible today, we usually only see young, male veterans representing all veterans experiencing PTSD. But there’s still a large population of Vietnam veterans who have been struggling with PTSD symptoms for over four decades, often with little support.

A recent article by The Family Institute at Northwestern University highlighted the ongoing impact of PTSD in older veterans, and how we can ensure they receive the unique types of support and interventions they need.

What Older Veterans Need

Diagnosis has typically been delayed in older veterans, which means some have been struggling for decades. These heroes face age-related events that could trigger an exacerbation of symptoms—like retirement, the loss of a loved one or changes in health.

Due to their unique needs, some experts suggest older veterans might benefit from a counseling approach that integrates the following:

- An approach that embraces the veteran's story and affirms their feelings
- Technology that increases access and decreases isolation (such as telehealth)
- An affirmation of the realities of both the trauma and the resulting symptoms of PTSD
- Peer support

Encouraging older veterans to embrace the benefits of therapy and counseling can be a challenge, so they may prefer to work with professionals who were/are also a member of the military in order to feel a sense of camaraderie.

Delayed-Onset PTSD In Older Veterans

About 31% of male American veterans who served in Vietnam experienced PTSD at some point in their lifetime, according to the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study. A 2013 study on the long-term effects of the conflict found that approximately 1 in 10 veterans who served in Vietnam experienced PTSD 40 years later.

This is called delayed-onset PTSD. Although most people experience symptoms of PTSD within a few months after a traumatic event, sometimes it can be years before someone experiences the full spectrum of their symptoms.

Dr. Dawn M. Wirick, daughter of a Vietnam veteran and a veteran herself, counsels older combat veterans and has seen the effects of delayed trauma: “What they end up telling me is down the road, when they retire, once they aren’t so busy, they start having recurring nightmares.”

There are a variety of complex factors that can lead to delayed-onset PTSD. Some of the main reasons why it was so prevalent among Vietnam veterans were:

- They were drafted
- The conflict itself was highly unpopular (so they were reluctant to talk about it)
- The troops were often treated poorly when they returned home

Additionally, as is the case for most men, they were told to “man up” and be strong, so expressing sadness was viewed as a sign of weakness. In result, many veterans repressed their feelings. This created more complex psychological reactions to their time in combat, and repressed feelings often find their way to the surface much later.

Older veterans need proper treatment to overcome these long-term effects of living with PTSD. Coming to terms with events that occurred decades ago is no easy task, but access to effective counseling can help validate what they are feeling, eliminate the sense of isolation and begin the healing process.

If you are a veteran in need of help or are concerned about a veteran in your life, visit the Veterans Crisis Line website or call their 24/7 hotline at 1-800-273-8255.

Gratitude Corner

The Board of Trustees and staff wish to express their deep gratitude to the individuals, companies and foundations who donated to NAMI GC throughout 2018.
Getting help

If you or someone you know is experiencing symptoms of depression, it is important to seek professional help before these symptoms reach a point of crisis. Depression is a serious condition, and someone struggling cannot just “snap out of it.”

Don’t drag your feet about asking for help and seeking the most appropriate treatment, either. There are a range of options available to help address symptoms of depression including; talk-therapy, connecting with peers through support groups, medication, and alternative therapies. It is important to know that depression can lead to suicide, especially when it’s left untreated. But take heart in knowing that most older adults with depression respond well to treatment.

The first step in getting help for depression is to talk to your parent. People with depression may not even realize that they’re struggling, so express why you’re concerned in a caring, supportive way. Be sure to explain that depression is a medical condition and not something to feel ashamed of. Then suggest that your parent see a primary care provider or a provider who specializes in depression among older individuals. The important thing is to have someone knowledgeable diagnose and address the needs of your aging parent.

You can continue to support your parent after a diagnosis. Offer to go to appointments, therapy sessions, or drive them to support group meetings, help make a list of questions to ask the doctor and make sure to get the answers, and pick up prescriptions (if medication has been prescribed). Check in often to see how your parent is feeling. Keep in mind that being homebound can increase the feelings of isolation and worsen the symptoms of depression. If your aging parent has mobility difficulties, look into assistive devices to help facilitate getting out of the house and engaging in social interaction.

With the proper attention and support, your parent can age without falling victim to depression.

New Senior Support Group

NAMI GC has added a new support group to address the needs of elderly people living with a mental illness. This is a combined support group, so both the seniors living with a mental health diagnosis and their family members may attend. The group meets the third Wednesday of each month from 2 p.m. until 3 p.m. in the 2nd Floor Conference Room of the Parma Care Center located at 5553 Broadview Rd. in Parma. For more information, call our Helpline at 216-875-0266.

Lambda Phi Omegas Make Donation to NAMI GC

Recently, members of the Lambda Phi Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) presented NAMI GC Program Director Marsha Mitchell-Blanks with a check for $1000 representing money the sorority raised at their SWAG Walk last summer. For the last four years, NAMI National and the AKAS have partnered to increase awareness of mental illness in the African American community. That partnership ended in July 2018 but NAMI GC has forged great relationships with both the Cleveland area’s Lambda Phi Omega and Alpha Omega Chapters. We greatly appreciate their support and hope to continue working with them to dispel stigma and encourage wellness.

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• Sadness, hopelessness, crying, or having suicidal thoughts

A quick, easy and confidential way to determine if one may be experiencing depression is to take a mental health screening. A screening is not a diagnosis, but a way of understanding if one’s symptoms are having enough of an impact that one should seek help from a doctor or other professional.

If your aging parent doesn’t have internet access, they can ask their primary care doctor to do a screening at their next visit.

Estate Planning

Remember NAMI Greater Cleveland’s Endowment in Your Estate Plans

Please help NAMI GC by designating our Endowment Fund as a beneficiary in your will, trust or funeral memorial. The Endowment insures financial stability, allowing NAMI GC to operate its programs (Helpline, education classes/programs, and support groups) at no cost, as well as to develop new initiatives to address community needs. Including NAMI GC as a beneficiary is easy to do, simply share your intentions with your financial planner or estate planning attorney.
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Members of NAMI Greater Cleveland are part of NAMI’s movement to improve the mental health system, to end stigma, and to create a culture of knowledge and understanding about mental illness. Membership is the first level of grassroots advocacy and the best way to support the NAMI movement. The more members stand behind NAMI, the more it strengthens our collective voice as we advocate!

To become a member or renew an existing membership, contact Liz at 216-875-0266 or lkrull@namicleveland.org.
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