

# Depression Awareness

by Mary Fenton

All humans experience the feelings associated with depression at certain times in life. They are normal reactions when disappointments and losses occur. At these times, spirits are usually low, normal life is disrupted and functioning is impaired. Briefly, the pain felt, is greater than the resources for coping. When the feelings and associated symptoms do not subside in a reasonable amount of time, it is imperative to seek professional help. There is no doubt that it can be a matter of life and death. Thus, awareness and knowledge about the symptoms is essential, and as John McIntyre, M.D., past president of the American Psychiatric Association says, "There is virtually no one who cannot be helped."

Untreated depression is the leading cause of suicide, and the potential depends on the severity of an individual's depression. Because depression is a serious illness that may lead to suicide, caring intervention is the first step towards recovery. The good news is that depression is as treatable as high blood pressure. The bad news is that there are several types and causes of depression, as well as modes of treatment. It requires highly trained professionals to untangle the web and discover the correct form of treatment for each unique individual.

Some of the types of depression are: Major Depression, which can be disabling episodes occurring once, twice or several times in a person's lifetime. Dysthymia, which is less severe, but chronic, can prevent optimal functioning or feeling as good as one could. Manic Depression or Bipolar is less prevalent and involves swings from elation or mania to depression.

Following are the symptoms of Major Depression, which is the most common condition. Not all persons will experience all symptoms:

- Persistent sad or empty mood
- Feeling hopeless, helpless, worthless, pessimistic and/or guilty
- Substance Abuse
- Fatigue or loss of interest in ordinary activities, including sex
- Disturbances in eating and sleeping patterns
- Irritability, increased crying, anxiety and panic attacks
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Thoughts of suicide: suicide plans or attempts

The symptoms of Dysthymia are similar to the above, and have been present for a period of two or more years. The symptoms of a Bipolar condition are more complicated, and involve swings from manic to depressive moods. Some of the symptoms of a manic episode include an elevated, expansive, or irritable mood. Additional symptoms which are often present are inflated self-esteem, decreased need for sleep, distraction, rapid speech and excessive involvement in pleasurable activities with a high potential for painful consequences. Hospitalization is often indicated if the symptoms are uncontrollable. (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV)

The treatment for any of the above conditions will depend on a complete and thorough evaluation by a qualified professional. The treatment of choice will depend on the results of this evaluation. Often, the treatment will be a combination of the correct medication to reduce symptoms for the person, and therapy to learn more effective ways to cope with life's problems.

Last, but not least, the following are some of the danger signs of suicide:

- Talking about suicide
- Statements about hopelessness, helplessness, or worthlessness
- Substance abuse
- Preoccupation with death
- Suddenly happier, calmer or at peace
- Loss of interest in things one cares about
- Visiting or calling people one cares about
- Making arrangements; setting affairs in order
- Giving things away

A suicidal person needs immediate intervention. Do not be afraid to ask them about suicidal thoughts. Often they are relieved to talk about them. It shows them that you care and take them seriously. Ask questions about current plans and methods, to ascertain if they are in immediate danger and if they are, do not leave them alone. Do not hesitate to dial 911. It is no longer a matter of privacy, but one of life and death. Above all, offer support, understanding, patience and encouragement. Then, leave the medical urgency to the qualified professionals. You would intervene if someone is having a heart attack. The suicidal impulse is just a lethal.

Treatment is easily accessible for all depressive conditions, and the best possible outcome is to recognize them in yourself or someone you care about, and to intervene with compassion and guidance to the proper resources. Some of these resources include, but are not limited to: C-SEAP, the statewide Employee Assistance Program for all state employees and family member over the age of 15, family physicians, psychiatrists, mental health centers, health insurance carriers and suicide hot lines. Again, the good news is that these conditions are highly treatable and "There is virtually no one who cannot be helped."

For more information or assistance call your local Mental Health Center, Insurance Provider, or C-SEAP Specialists can be reached at 1-800-821-8154.