

Depression and dementia

This help sheet is about depression in people living with dementia. It explains how to recognise depression and treatment options.

Dementia affects people in different ways and changes in the behaviour or emotional state of a person living with dementia are common.

About depression

Depression can refer to a temporary depressed mood or a more serious condition that needs treatment.

A depressed mood may be:

- a normal reaction to an event, such as the death of a loved one
- a symptom of another disorder, for example, hypothyroidism
- a symptom of a depressive disorder, such as major depression.

Depression as a disorder

A depressive disorder usually includes a depressed mood or loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities, together with other symptoms. These may include a lack of energy, changes in appetite, sleeping too much or too little and feelings of guilt or worthlessness.

Depression is not a normal part of ageing.

Depression and dementia

Depression is very common in people living with dementia. An estimated 20 to 30 per cent of people living with dementia experience depressive symptoms. People in long-term residential care are particularly at risk.

Other factors that may contribute to someone's depression include:

- physical illness
- social isolation

- fatigue
- environmental factors, such as lack of sunlight and fresh air, or unwanted stimulation from background noise
- a negative response to a diagnosis of dementia and the perceived impact on their lifestyle.

Depression can also be a side effect of certain medications.

Signs of depression

It can be hard to know if someone living with dementia is depressed. Many symptoms of dementia and depression are alike.

Some signs to look for include:

- loss of interest and pleasure in activities the person usually enjoys
- lack of energy
- poor sleep patterns
- loss of appetite and weight
- expressing feelings of worthlessness or sadness
- being unusually emotional or agitated
- increased confusion.

Diagnosing depression

If you think depression may be affecting someone living with dementia, discuss your concerns with their doctor or health professional.

The doctor can do a thorough examination to rule out other medical problems.

Treating depression can significantly improve someone's mood and ability to take part in activities. It is important to investigate and treat depression whenever it is suspected.

Treatment

If depression is diagnosed, a doctor may prescribe antidepressant medication. Prescribed antidepressant medication can help improve depressed feelings, appetite and sleep. A doctor may also make a referral to a psychologist or counsellor.

Antidepressants can have side effects, which should be discussed with the doctor before treatment is started. It is also useful to see the doctor two weeks after commencing medication to discuss any side effects and how the medication is working.

Tips to provide ongoing support

- Keep to a daily routine.
- Encourage regular exercise.
- Reduce noise and activity in the environment. This will help avoid overstimulation.
- Organise activities they previously enjoyed. If possible, include family and friends.
- Have realistic expectations. Expecting too much can lead to frustration and disappointment.
- Get important tasks done at the time of day when they have the most energy.
- Be positive. Optimistic and supportive words will help everyone.
- Include the person in as much conversation as they feel comfortable with.

Where to get help

- Discuss with the person's doctor your concerns about changes in behaviour, and the impact on you and the person you care for.
- Call the **National Dementia Helpline** on **1800 100 500** to learn about support services and education programs, including carer support groups, counselling, and services and programs to assist you to understand and respond to changes and maintain your health and wellbeing.
- Call the **Dementia Behaviour Management Advisory Service** on **1800 699 799**. They support people living with dementia who experience changes in behaviour that impact their care or the carer.

Additional reading and resources

- Dementia Australia help sheets: Changes in behaviour
Visit: dementia.org.au/help-sheets
- Dementia Australia library service
Visit: dementia.org.au/library
- Dementia Australia support
Visit: dementia.org.au/support
- Dementia Australia education
Visit: dementia.org.au/education

Further information

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling.

National Dementia Helpline: 1800 100 500

For language assistance: 131 450

Visit our website: dementia.org.au