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BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

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Healthy matters to keep in mind.

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Focus on Your Physical Health If You Suffer from Depression

Most of us know that depression is a disorder that affects the mind, but did you know that it can also affect your body? Depression affects the way a person eats, sleeps and feels about oneself. It includes a variety of symptoms and can affect and impact lives in many different ways. Depression can have serious health consequences – both mental and physical – if untreated.

Depression and Illness

When physical health challenges and depression occur at the same time, it can be hard to know which came first. For example, if you're having problems sleeping, it may be a symptom of depression. Or your sleeping problems may be contributing to your depression.

Depression often co-exists with other illnesses.

- Some illnesses may precede the depression.
- Some illnesses (or the medications we take for those illnesses) may cause the depression.
- Some illnesses may be the consequence of depression or caused by the medications we take for depression.

In addition, sometimes non-chronic medical conditions or complaints, such as body aches or fatigue, may mask symptoms of depression.

Serious Medical Conditions Associated with Depression

When an individual has a serious medical condition and depression, this

is called "co-occurring depression." Co-occurring depression has been seen with individuals diagnosed with heart disease, stroke, diabetes, cancer, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, and HIV/AIDS. Alcohol and other substance abuse may also co-occur with depression.¹

Studies have shown that people who have depression in addition to another serious medical illness tend to have more severe symptoms of both depression and the medical illness. They also have more difficulty adapting to their medical condition. Research indicates that treating the depression can also help improve the outcome of

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What Is Depression?

Depression is a serious mental health condition that can affect a person's body, mood, behavior, and thoughts. Symptoms may last for weeks, months or years. Having a depressive disorder is more than feeling "down" or "blue." The good news is that treatment can help most people suffering from depression.

Physical signs of depression may include such symptoms as:

- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities that were once enjoyed
- Decreased energy and fatigue
- Insomnia, early-morning waking or oversleeping
- Impotence and decreased sexual desire
- Appetite and/or weight loss, or overeating and weight gain
- Persistent physical symptoms that don't respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders and chronic pain

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treating the co-occurring illness.¹

Diagnosis and Treatment

It's important to look at physical and mental health in a holistic manner, and

work to diagnose and treat them in a coordinated way.

Sometimes, depression is not properly diagnosed because patients, family members and health care professionals confuse the symptoms of depression for

symptoms of the chronic condition. This results in treatment for the symptoms without addressing the disease of depression itself. Research shows that individuals who receive treatment for co-occurring

depression often experience an improvement in their overall medical condition, better compliance with general medical care, and a better quality of life.²

Five Steps to Protect Your Physical Health

Depression is very serious. First and foremost, if you're thinking about suicide or harming yourself, get help immediately. Don't be embarrassed or ashamed.

- Call the National Suicide Prevention and Crisis Hotline 1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433) or 1-800-273-TALK (8255) TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (4889).
- If it is an emergency, call 911.
- Go to an emergency room.
- Call your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or behavioral health care program.
- Call your behavioral health professional or physician.
- Call a local crisis line or suicide hotline (located at the front of the phonebook or in the blue pages in the middle).

If you've been diagnosed with depression, or even if you haven't, here are some actions you can take to protect your physical health.

1. Exercise. Exercise can be an effective antidepressant for both the short term and over a long period,

especially for older people. Go for a walk or jog, lift weights or take a bike ride – and do it regularly. Before you begin an exercise program, be sure to consult your physician. Set reasonable goals and begin gradually.

2. Follow a Healthy Diet.

Eating well not only improves your physical well-being; it can also have a positive effect on your mental health. Talk with a physician or a dietician about a healthy diet.

3. Get Rest. Rest is one way to maintain good physical and mental health; however, many people don't get enough sleep. Though everyone's ideal amount of sleep is different, it's estimated that we should strive for eight to nine hours of sleep a night.

4. Moderate Alcohol Consumption and Don't Abuse Drugs. Alcohol can worsen symptoms of depression. It also interferes with many medications, especially those that treat depression.

If your physician allows and you choose to drink, use common sense.

Any form of drug abuse or misuse is unhealthy, whether the drug is an illegal substance, a physician's prescription or an over-the-counter medicine. Always follow your physician's or pharmacist's instructions regarding prescription use.

5. Reduce Stress. Stress is a natural part of life, but too much stress can lead to health problems. Rather than trying to avoid stress completely – which is impossible – learn healthful ways to manage it.

- Set limits and learn to say no to obligations that overburden you.
- Use relaxation techniques every day; these could include yoga, meditation or listening to music.
- Let go of stressful thoughts. Try not to focus on issues you can't change and spend time and energy on things that you can change.

- Get support by sharing your feelings with a support group, friends, family, or a behavioral health professional.

Resources

United Behavioral Health

Ask your HR representative for your access code and toll-free number.

www.liveandworkwell.com

- Visit the Depression Mental Health Condition Center for strategies and resources to manage depression and its physical symptoms.

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1 National Institute of Mental Health. Depression. Publication NIH 08-3561. <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression/nimhdepression.pdf>. Accessed August 20, 2010.

2 National Mental Health Association. "Co-Occurrence of Depression with Medical, Psychiatric, and Substance Abuse Disorders." <http://www.nmha.org/infoctr/factsheets/28.cfm>. Accessed August 20, 2010.