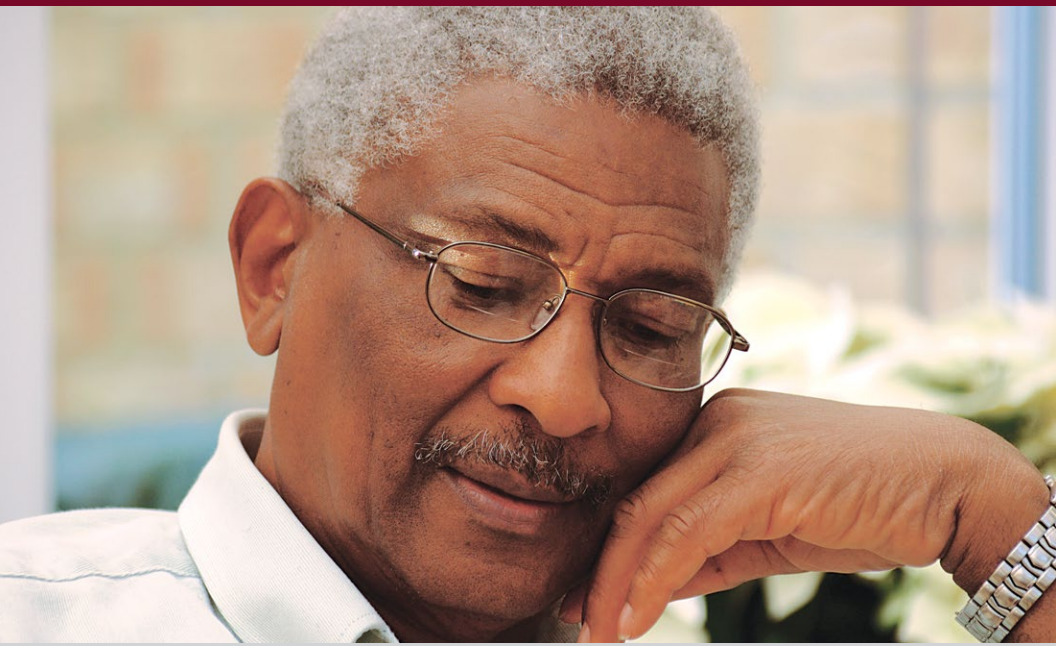
Depression and Your Heart

Understanding the Connection

The Mended Hearts, Inc.

What is **Depression?**



Everyone feels sad sometimes. That's a normal part of life. But sometimes people feel sad for extended periods of time, with or without a "reason," to the extent that it interferes with their daily activities. These could be signs of a condition called depression.

Depression is actually a fairly common condition among people who have had a heart event. As many as one in three who've had a heart attack report feelings of depression. Women, people who've already reported depression before, and people without a social network or emotional support are at higher risk for depression following a heart event.

It's important to understand that depression isn't a character flaw, nor is it something you can just shake off or snap out of. It's a serious chronic condition that requires medical care. But there's good news: Depression can be treated very effectively, and most people who are treated experience at least some relief from their symptoms.

Symptoms of Depression

While depression isn't an easy thing to define, there are definite symptoms associated with the condition.

These include:

- **Feeling sad or having a depressed mood, including crying often**
- **Losing interest in activities you used to enjoy**
- **Any change in appetite or weight**
- **Sleeping too much or too little**
- **Feeling agitated, cranky, or sluggish**
- **Losing energy**
- **Feeling guilty or worthless**
- **Having trouble concentrating or making decisions**
- **Having thoughts of death or suicide**

Depression is often described as having symptoms from that list nearly every day, all day, for two or more weeks. That's part of what distinguishes the symptoms of depression from ordinary feelings of sadness. The first two symptoms are especially common.

For patients who've had a heart event, the symptoms of depression can be more severe. That's why it's especially important to seek treatment if you believe you are experiencing depression.

Effects of Depression

Depression affects everything in your daily life, including your recovery from your heart event. In fact, depression can make recovery more difficult because it can lead to:

- **A lower desire to follow the treatment plan**
- **Greater likelihood to smoke and drink**
- **Greater risk for another heart event**
- **Lower desire for physical activity**
- **Bad eating habits**
- **Anxiety**
- **Problems at work or school**
- **Family and relationship problems**
- **Social isolation**
- **Suicide**

That's why it's important to understand that depression isn't a "normal" part of recovering from a heart event. It needs to be treated, along with the heart event itself.

Depression affects the mind and the body. Left untreated, it can take a terrible toll on every aspect of a person's life.

Suicidal Thoughts and Feelings

If the idea of suicide has entered your thinking, don't take it lightly. Make an appointment with a health care professional, but in the meantime, don't hesitate to call a friend or family member, or your spiritual leader, to talk about how you're feeling. Also, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24 hours a day, toll free, at 1-800-273-8255. Trained counselors are available there to help. However you handle these thoughts and feelings, don't go it alone.

Diagnosis

If you suspect you are depressed, you should see your health care provider. Before you go, prepare to answer some questions about your symptoms. It's a good idea to write down some basic information, such as:

- **Your symptoms, including any you are having, even if they don't seem related to the depression.**
- **Your personal information, such as major changes in your life or anything that is causing you stress.**
- **Your medications, including over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and supplements.**
- **Questions to ask your health care provider. Don't hesitate to ask anything you are unclear about, such as symptoms, treatment options, etc.**

Your health care provider will probably conduct a physical exam and take a medical history. In some cases, a blood test or other lab procedure may be the next step. You will probably be asked about your thoughts and feelings, what you've noticed about your own behavior patterns, and whether you've had such symptoms before.

Treatment

The good news about depression is that it can be treated effectively in most cases. In fact, about 80 to 90 percent of all treated cases result in improvement.

It may be helpful to think of treating depression as part of your overall treatment plan following your heart event. For your treatment plan to work best, it's important to treat depression as part of the plan.

Your health care provider may prescribe one or more of the following treatment approaches:

MEDICATION

Antidepressant medication is a commonly used treatment approach because it is very effective in reducing symptoms. Some antidepressants can interact with heart medications, so ask your prescriber and pharmacist before starting any new medications. Many of the current medications work relatively quickly and with fewer side effects, as compared to older medicines. But be

aware that most medications have to build up in the bloodstream before they're effective, so be patient. Ask your health care provider which medicine might be most effective for you.

It's very important to tell your health care provider about any side effects you experience from the medication. If you have any questions about side effects, be sure to ask.

TALK THERAPY

Another important treatment option is psychotherapy, or "talk therapy." These counseling sessions with a mental health provider can be a very effective part of your treatment plan. In fact, research has demonstrated that a combination of medication and talk therapy tends to work best for most people with depression. The goal of such therapy is usually to help you better understand the condition, and to develop approaches for coping with depressed thoughts and feelings when they arise.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Many people find that having a social network helps them cope. This can include group therapy or a support group, or it can be something unrelated to depression itself, such as a church group or Mended Hearts. Many Mended Hearts volunteers have reported improvement in their depression symptoms because of their involvement in the organization, in fact.

LIFESTYLE

It may not surprise you to learn that diet and exercise play a key role in combating depression. It's important to eat a healthy diet as part of your treatment plan following your heart event, and sticking to that diet can help keep depression at bay, as well.

For More Information

The National Alliance
on Mental Illness
nami.org
1-800-950-NAMI (6264)

MedlinePlus **medlineplus.gov**

National Institute of Mental Health
nimh.nih.gov

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
1-800-273-8255

Likewise, exercise plays an important role in controlling depression symptoms. It needn't be strenuous exercise, either; physical activities such as walking or gardening can help.

It's very important to avoid alcohol and illicit drugs in treating depression. While these may seem to help with symptoms, they generally make depression worse in the long run and can lead to severe health consequences, among other problems.

Another important habit is getting plenty of sleep. It's particularly important to get sleep when you are battling depression. If you are having trouble sleeping, talk with your health care provider about your options for improving your sleep.

INFORMATION SOURCES

FamilyDoctor.org

MayoClinic.com

The National Alliance on Mental Illness
nami.org

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More about The Mended Hearts, Inc.

The Mended Hearts volunteer who visited with you represents a support group for people who have heart disease and others who are interested, including the families and loved ones of the patient. Founded in 1951, Mended Hearts provides patient-to-patient visits as well as educational and supportive meetings in partnership with more than 460 hospitals nationwide. While our volunteers are careful not to dispense medical advice, our activities are designed to help you learn more about your disease and procedures as well as provide social interaction with others who have been where you are. Ask about Mended Hearts during your next medical checkup or use the Web site listed below. The Mended Hearts motto is, "It's great to be alive … and to help others!"

The Mended Hearts, Inc.

For chapter information, please call

1-888-Heart99 (1-888-432-7899)

Write to

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