

THE STRONG RAM PROGRAM

Older African American Men with Depression

Some people think that depression is a normal part of aging, but it isn't most older adults are satisfied with their lives. It's normal to feel sad about the death of a spouse or aging-related issues such as loss of mobility. But if that sadness overtakes everyday life and makes it difficult to carry on, the problem may be depression.

Depression in older adults is **frequently misdiagnosed**, since doctors may dismiss its symptoms as the result of a physical illness such as cancer, heart attack, or stroke. There is a higher prevalence of depressive symptoms among elderly African American men than in elderly White men, but depression in African American men is **underrecognized and undertreated**. This makes knowing how to recognize depression in older African American men and being aware of treatment options especially crucial.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL SIGNS

Symptoms of depression are different for each person. Someone with depression may feel sad, anxious, hopeless, guilty, irritable, or restless. Other possible symptoms:

-  Being reluctant to leave home or spend time with friends.
-  Complaining of being a burden to the family.
-  Gaining or losing weight due to changes in appetite.
-  Sleeping too much or very little.
-  Drinking more alcohol or using other drugs.
-  Having frequent thoughts of suicide or talking about death a great deal.

Older men with depression are more likely to complain of the physical symptoms associated with depression, such as aches and pains, and to show a lack of interest in activities they once enjoyed. Many older African American men may not relate to the term "depression"; they may refer to feeling "downhearted" or "blue."

STATISTICS

-  Fifty-six percent of African Americans believe that depression is a normal part of aging.
-  Adult African Americans are 20 percent more likely to report serious psychological distress than adult Whites are.
-  Adult African Americans living in poverty are two to three times more likely to report serious psychological distress than those not living in poverty.
-  While 69 percent of adult Whites with a major depressive episode in 2009 received treatment, only 53 percent of adult African Americans did.

RISK FACTORS FOR DEPRESSION IN OLDER ADULTS



Mental health is a product of a person's **emotional, psychological, and social well-being**. Brain chemistry, difficult life experiences, and a family history of mental health problems can affect a man's chances of developing depression over his lifetime.

There are other factors that may make a man more vulnerable to depression, many of which become more common with age:

-  Being diagnosed with a new or chronic physical disorder, such as diabetes, or developing multiple chronic physical disorders
-  Stroke, bypass operation, or hip fracture
-  Racism/discrimination
-  Poor health, physical or functional disability, or severe chronic pain
-  Prior episodes of depression
-  Income changes, such as retirement or financial hardship
-  Recent loss of a spouse or loved one
-  Living alone or social isolation
-  Changes in medications or new prescribed medications

HOW TO ADDRESS DEPRESSION

Untreated depression in older men can lead to new or worsened physical health problems, such as heart attacks, and can make recovery from other physical illnesses more difficult. A doctor or other health professional may be able to diagnose and treat depression or refer someone with depression to other mental health services, such as counseling or talk therapy. Individual or family insurance or Medicare can help cover treatment costs. There may also be nonprofits in the community that offer mental health services at little or no cost.

In addition to finding a mental health professional who specializes in aging issues, doing the following could help to alleviate depression:

-  Joining a community club and engaging in enjoyable activities
-  Engaging in easy physical activity or exercise (with a doctor's approval)
-  Seeking new hobbies
-  Reaching out for support

Untreated depression in older adults is likely to lead to new or **worsening physical illness, longer recovery periods for illness or surgery, and premature death**. Receiving appropriate treatment for depression can help older men lead longer, healthier lives.

