

Depression in Persons with Intellectual Disabilities

A common illness, depression can affect anyone, including individuals with developmental disabilities. About 1 in 20 Americans (over 11 million people) get depressed every year, and about 1 in 5 adults experience significant depression.

Adults with intellectual disabilities are more likely to experience depression than their peers with “average” intelligence, and depression rates as one of the most frequent psychiatric disorders in adults with intellectual disabilities. However, support providers and medical professionals often fail to diagnose depression in individuals with intellectual disabilities because of difficulties in communication and social interaction.

What is depression?

Depression goes beyond just “feeling blue” or being “down in the dumps”. It is a medical disorder, just like diabetes, high blood pressure, or heart disease. Depression affects an individual’s thoughts, feelings, physical health and behavior. People may continue to function with depression, but with feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, worry, anxiety, fear, dread, or fatigue.

What are some symptoms of depression?

Symptoms of depression vary from person to person, but include:

- Depressed mood (feeling sad or empty, being “tearful”) most of the day, nearly every day
- Marked loss of interest in things and activities that used to be enjoyable
- Irritability, especially in people with developmental disabilities
- Fatigue, slowing down, constantly feeling tired
- Restlessness and inability to sit still, increased anxiety
- Feeling worthless or guilty – constantly apologizing
- Increase/decrease in appetite/weight
- Thinking or speaking of death/suicide
- Problems concentrating, thinking, remembering, or making decisions
- Trouble sleeping OR sleeping too much

What can cause depression?

Many factors lead to depression. Vulnerability factors include:

- **Biological** -including genetic disposition, medical conditions such as thyroid disease, or physical illness
- **Psychological** - such as abuse or loss of significant relationships/people (formerly institutionalized individuals show an especially high risk of depression)
- **Social** - relationship problems, poverty, boredom

As well, certain stressful conditions may work with these vulnerability factors to trigger depression or prevent recovery. Most stressors have a perceived element of loss or threat for the individual:

- **Bereavement**
- **Change in support staff**
- **Change in routine**
- **Altered living situation (moving to new residence)**
- **Abuse/neglect**
- **Major illness or chronic painful condition**

Keep in mind that individuals perceive their unique life experiences differently. What may not be a significant event to you may cause great stress to your consumer! However, depression can also occur even when life seems to be going well.

How can I know if my consumer may be depressed?

Because individuals with intellectual disabilities may not recognize their symptoms as indicators of depression or illness, you may need to support their well-being by watching for the signs of depression for them. One of the first steps is to develop your ability to communicate with them, even if they don't possess good communication skills.

Try alternative forms of communication, such as pictures, symbols, or drawings, to help them recognize and express how they feel each day. By doing so, you will also strengthen the relationship

you have with your consumer, which is crucial to helping them share their feelings. Also rely on fellow support team members, sharing your concerns with them if you feel a consumer may be depressed or experiencing stress in their lives.

Other possible actions/considerations:

- Draw faces and ask the consumer to point to the drawing shows how she/he feels.
- Observe the consumer – is he/she doing what they normally do during the day?
- Talk to other support staff – do they find it harder to encourage the consumer to participate in activities?
- Does the consumer complain that he/she doesn't feel like doing things anymore?
- Pay attention to eating/sleeping habits – have these changed?
- Document eating/sleeping patterns regularly so you have a baseline to recognize changes.
- Ask yourself (and possibly others) if you are confusing a consumer's agitation or irritability for "aggression" or "non-compliance".
- Is the consumer giving away or destroying possessions?
- Does it "take forever" for them to finish tasks?
- Are they focusing on losses or talking more about loved ones who have died?

- Is the consumer injuring or threatening to kill themselves?
Take any threats of suicide seriously, even if it is common for a consumer to do so. Report all such threats or injuries.

Can depression be treated?

Keep in mind that depression is not the fault of a person, nor is it a weakness. It is merely a medical illness, and is treatable – for both individuals with and without intellectual disabilities. If you are concerned that your consumer may be depressed, be sure to report this to your supervisor, departmental nurse, case manager, or other administrator. Medical intervention may be required.

Some possible treatments include:

- **Therapy** – to help consumers change negative thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors
- **Medications** – to help rebalance neurotransmitters, and reduce anxiety or improve energy

Be aware that some medications for depression cause side effects:

- **Digestive** – nausea, diarrhea, heartburn
- **Nervous system** – jitters, restlessness, headache, sedation
- **Sexual problems**
- **Discontinuation syndrome** – flu-like symptoms, sleep/thinking/mood disturbances

If your consumer is prescribed anti-depressants or other medications for depression or anxiety, be sure to document any changes in behavior or mood. Also, be aware that anti-depressants should always be decreased slowly, under the care of a medical profession. If responsible to monitor medications, encourage consumers to take their medications as prescribed, and be sure to document and notify nursing staff immediately of any missed or refused medications.

Additional therapies might help:

- **Expressive therapy**
- **Art therapy**
- **Dance/movement therapy**
- **Hippotherapy** (horse-assisted therapy)

You may also help your consumer take actions to reduce or prevent the symptoms of depression. Encourage them to:

- Exercise (if approved by your facility nursing staff)
- Spend time with others and avoid isolation
- Get plenty of sleep on a regular schedule
- Eat a healthy diet
- Talk about what causes them to feel down
- Develop actions to take when they feel down

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