

DEPRESSION, BEWARE OF THE HIDDEN DANGER

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I call Depression 'The Hidden Danger' because it may masquerade in many different ways. A person who has depression may not even know that he or she has it and a physician may not even be able to diagnose depression, unless that physician is very astute clinically.

Depression is a very common condition. National statistics state that more than 20 million people in the United States have depression, in other words; one in 20 Americans suffers from depression. Remember that many of these persons remain undiagnosed and suffer severe negative consequences because of the lack of treatment. It is especially important to keep in mind that depression is two times more prevalent in women than in men. Women may also suffer a unique kind of depression known as Post Partum Depression (PPD) that occurs after childbirth and may persist as major depression for a long time after the 'peri-partum' (around childbirth) period. Fortunately, physicians and health care providers are becoming more and more aware of PPD. New Jersey is the first state in the country to start the 'speak up when you are down' awareness program for women. New Jersey is the first state in the country to mandate screening for PPD. Therefore, women are being actively screened for PPD and being treated if indicated.

Depression is a serious medical illness that involves the 'chemistry' or the 'working chemicals' of the brain. In other words at a simple level one can view depression as an imbalance of the chemicals in the brain that control one's mood and 'affect' or 'how one feels'. The feelings of being 'down' or 'sad' are present, but they are so intense and frequent that they interfere with the daily life of the effected person and disrupt the person's daily activities. Being depressed can completely alter a person's 'outlook' of life. Depression effects and can take over one's thoughts and feelings and can change the person's behavior. Having depression for a long time has been shown in many research studies to affect the person's physical health negatively. Indeed, long term depression has been shown to actually decrease the person's immunity to common infections e.g. person's who are depressed are known to suffer more 'common colds', they take longer to recover from surgeries, even the death rate from heart attacks is known to be higher for depressed people.

How can any person suspect that he or she could have depression? The following are some of the symptoms of depression

- feeling 'sad' most of the time
- loss of interest in activities that were normally enjoyable
- increase in weight (this is because some people eat more than normal when they are depressed) or loss of weight due to not feeling hungry
- feeling overly sleepy even during the day or unable to sleep during the night
- feeling tired all the time
- feeling 'aches and pains' in various areas of the body without any real injury or disease
- feeling worthless 'no good'
- constant headaches
- diarrhea or pain abdomen
- sexual problems such as lack of desire or difficulty in erection or lack of enjoyment of sexual activity
- feeling 'hopeless' and 'dark' most of the time
- feeling that life is so useless that it would be better to die (suicidal thoughts) in severe cases

Remember that the above list is not meant to be all inclusive i.e. there may be many other vague or even physical symptoms which are thought to be real physical illnesses but do not become better with given treatment. If the physician tries to investigate 'in-depth', sometimes the true cause is revealed as depression.

Depression may have any grade of severity e.g. mild or moderate or severe. If a person has severe depression he or she may be unable to accomplish even everyday normal activities and may be prone to suicide. In mild depression a person is able to do their everyday tasks but it takes an extra effort and enjoyment may be markedly less than normal. With moderate depression, the person can perform some of their activities and may not be able to perform some activities.

There may be various causes of depression such as loss/death of partner via death or divorce or infidelity, loss of job or parent or sibling, financial problems, other life stresses, long physical illness such as diabetes or cancer or even chronic pain.

All is not lost because depression is a curable or controllable illness once it is diagnosed. In years past, being depressed was considered to be a stigma because it was thought that a person who suffers from depression is a 'weak' human being. Modern medicine now recognizes that there is no 'weakness of character' in a person that is depressed, and that depression is a real medical illness.

There are various treatments for depression such as medications, psychotherapy or a combination of both. In severe cases especially if the depressed person has tried to commit suicide, then in-hospital treatment may become necessary.

I must stress that depression is common; it is not a 'stigma' or a sign of personal weakness if you are depressed. Do not hesitate to seek help and advice from your physician if you suspect that you may have depression.

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