

Volunteer Leader Training Guide

Depression: The Invisible Disease

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Introduction

Depression is an illness that affects the whole person. Not only does it affect mood, it can also affect the way you feel about yourself and how you think about things. It can even affect how a person eats and sleeps.

Over 12 million U.S. citizens have been diagnosed with depression. This disease affects both men and women of all ethnic backgrounds. It is not the same as just “feeling blue,” and it can’t be wished away. People with a depressive disease can’t just “pull it together” and get back to their normal life. However, with appropriate treatment, most people can find help with depression.

Target Audience

- EHC leaders
- Adult audiences

Objectives

- Participants will learn the definition of depression.
- Participants will be able to identify depression in themselves or another person.
- Participants will learn the causes of depression.
- Participants will learn action steps to take for themselves or family members if they suspect depression.

Main Teaching Points

- Define depression.
- Identify at least three signs of depression.
- Identify at least two reasons of how depression can occur.
- Identify at least five treatment options for depression.

Handouts

- Handout 1: “Depression: The Invisible Disease” Brochure
- Handout 2: 10 Steps to Managing Your Emotions

- Handout 3: Depression Tool Kit
- Activity Sheet: Includes instructions for Activities 1, 2 and 3.
 - This does not have to be printed and given to the audience. You may prefer to have a copy for your personal use during the lesson.

Suggestions for Teaching

- Review the lesson introduction and study the main teaching points.
- Make copies of:
 - Handout 1: “Depression: The Invisible Disease” brochure
 - Handout 2: 10 Steps to Managing Your Emotions
 - Handout 3: Depression Tool Kit
- Practice and become familiar with the activities before you teach the lesson.

What Is Depression?

Handout 1: “Depression: The Invisible Disease” Brochure

Handout 2: 10 Steps to Managing Your Emotions

Everyone has felt “down” or “low” every once in a while, but when those symptoms occur for two consecutive weeks or more, depression can be considered as a diagnosis.

Depression is a serious medical illness that needs professional care. It is considered a chronic disorder by most doctors and may need long-term treatment. It is different for everyone, and some experience it more frequently than others. Depression affects how people think and behave and can cause emotional and physical problems. People may even experience difficulty in going about their daily routines.

Symptoms of Depression

Symptoms of depression can be both emotional and physical. Here are a few examples of emotional symptoms:

- Loss of interest
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Restless
- Irritable
- Easily annoyed
- Feeling “sad” or “down”
- Guilt
- Weight gain/loss
- Crying
- Fatigue or weakness
- Thoughts of suicide
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Trouble sleeping

Depression also produces bodily pain. Everyone experiences depression differently, but some physical signs of depression include frequent headaches or back pain, tender muscles, sore joints, feelings of chronic fatigue or dizziness and sleeping too much or too little. Some people gain weight while others lose weight as their appetite changes to where a person eats too much or too little or has unusual cravings. Many people who are depressed may also suffer from digestive issues such as constipation, nausea or frequent diarrhea.

Activity Sheet: Activity 1, *Deep Breathing*

Are You at Risk for Depression?

No one is immune to depression; it doesn't matter your age, race or gender. You could be affected at some point in your life. This is why it is so important to recognize the signs.

If someone in your family struggles with depression, you could be at a greater risk. Also, the death of a loved one is another factor for developing depression. Those who have dealt with a long-term illness or who have been taking certain medications for many years are also at risk. Women who have recently given birth may go through drastic lifestyle and hormonal changes that can lead to postpartum depression. Those struggling with addictions, such as with alcohol, nicotine or drug abuse, or who have mood disorders may suffer from depression. Also, those from a lower socioeconomic group are at a higher risk due to financial reasons.

Anyone can be at risk for depression, but there are some risk factors that may predispose a person to developing depression. Some of them include a genetic predisposition, biochemical changes in the brain, gender and environment.

Genetic Predisposition

If someone in your family has experienced depression, then you are more at risk for developing it too. There is some research indicating the presence of a depression gene is indeed real. This gene may increase susceptibility that weakens the circuits in the brain that process negative emotions.

Biochemical Changes

Depression is real, and it starts in the brain circuitry. The brain is a powerhouse of informational networks. Sometimes a shock or a trauma can occur to derail these networks. Examples include the loss of a job or the death of a loved one. Other situational events that can affect the brain are certain medications, substance abuse, hormonal changes or even the weather.

Environment

There are many situational events found in our environment that can trigger an event of depression. For example, some sort of trauma, a significant life-altering event such as the loss of a job or financial stress or an existing medical condition such as heart disease can cause depression. It can even worsen medical conditions. Medications or substance abuse can also alter the brain.

Suicide Watch

People who are depressed can be suicidal. They may speak a lot about death and dying, show aggressive behavior or engage in risky behavior. If you find that you feel like this or see this in a loved one, you need to speak to a professional as soon as possible. You can also call the suicide hotline or go to the emergency room.

The number of the Suicide Hotline is 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433).

How Do You Help Yourself If You Are Depressed?

Depression can leave you feeling hopeless. You may find it hard to take the steps to help yourself. Here are a few ways to help yourself.

- Don't expect your mood to change overnight; it has to happen over time.
- Spend time with family and friends who you trust and can confide in.
- Make time for social activities such as going to the movies, to dinner or even a picnic.
- Hold off on major decisions such as marriage, divorce, changing jobs or switching homes until you feel better.
- Positive thinking will replace negative thoughts as you go through treatment.

Where Can I Go for Help?

Mental Health Resources

- Mental health specialists: psychiatrists, psychologist or social workers
- Community health centers
- State hospital outpatient clinics
- Hospital psychiatric departments
- Family services, social agencies or clergy
- Private clinics and facilities
- Local psychiatric societies
- Peer support groups
- Employee assistance programs

Types of Depression

All of these are types of depression a person can go through, but in the end, it is still depression and should be treated.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

Some people are affected by the weather and being in environments consistently lacking in sunlight can produce seasonal affective disorder (SAD). If you feel that your mood matches the weather, especially in the winter when daylight is shorter and the weather is gloomier, chances are you, along with 9 million other people, share seasonal affective disorder.

Postpartum Depression

Postpartum depression, or a dark mood that settles after the baby is born, is serious and real. It can be dangerous for the baby as their care and bonding with the mother can be compromised. If someone is suffering from postpartum depression, it is important they speak with a health care professional immediately. If a mother is nursing and has to take medications, she will need to speak with her doctor about other feeding alternatives for her baby.

Childhood Depression

More and more children are depressed. This can affect their ability to do schoolwork or have friends. They lose interest in playing like other children. If a child is depressed it is serious as they are more likely to consider suicide. Children do not always show sad behavior. Sometimes they can act out and become aggressive or engage in risky behavior.

Handout 3: Depression Tool Kit

Diagnosing Depression

While there is no official blood test to diagnose depression, some blood tests may be performed that can identify other problems that can be contributing to the depression. One test can include a drug screening because substance abuse can produce the onset of depression.

The thyroid is the body's engine, and when it is not working properly, feelings of depression can be common. Also vitamin B₁₂ or iron deficiency, along with some other vitamin or mineral deficiencies, can also produce extreme fatigue or imbalance of mood. So the first place to start is to get a thorough medical screening.

Treatment Options

Seeking Professional Help

There are many different treatment options. Depression should be treated by a psychologist or psychiatrist, rather than a medical doctor, as these are professionals who are trained to identify and treat the depression appropriately. It is also important to be honest as there are many forms of treatment for depression, and depending on the person, different people may have different types of treatments.

Treatment: Cognitive Behavior Therapy

One form of therapy used by psychologists is cognitive behavior therapy. The patient talks through some underlying issues that may have contributed to the depression and problem areas are identified. The patient, along with the psychologist, works through several problem-solving situations to gain skills to use after the counseling is completed.

Treatment: Medication

Another form of treatment is through medication. However, there are pros and cons as with any other medication. A physician, particularly a psychiatrist, can prescribe medications while psychologists cannot. A psychologist, however, can determine if medications can help with your treatment. If you need medication for treatment, it is important to be treated by a psychiatrist, as these practitioners are trained to identify the best medication for you.

Treatment: Exercise

This is a powerful tool when dealing with depression. Studies show that it can be as effective as medication at increasing energy levels and decreasing fatigue in people with mild to moderate depression. It also lacks the side effects that come with medication. Exercise raises endorphins and reduces stress and muscle tension. It also reduces pain and can help you sleep.

Activity Sheet: Activity 3, *Stretch It Out!***Treatment: Light Therapy**

Light therapy can be very helpful for those living in regions with few hours of sunlight, especially during the winter. The light box gives off a bright light that mimics sunlight. This treatment has not been approved by the FDA as of yet and may trigger mania episodes in those with bipolar disorder.

You shouldn't use if:

- You have skin that is sensitive to light.
- You are taking medication that can react with sunlight.
- You have an eye condition that makes them vulnerable to light damage.

Treatment: Supplements

St. John's wort has been used for centuries as a cure for illness and depression. While some studies show that it may help with mild to moderate depression, others don't. Furthermore, this supplement is not regulated by the FDA. (As with other supplements, it has not been tested for purity, safety or effectiveness before it reaches the market.) On February 10, 2000, the FDA issued a Public Health Advisory letter stating that the herb appears to interfere with certain medications used to treat heart disease, depression, seizures, certain cancers and organ transplant rejection. The herb also may interfere with the effectiveness of oral contraceptives. Because of these potential interactions, make sure you talk with your doctor or pharmacist before taking this supplement.

Treatment: Alternative Therapies

Alternative therapies have been studied for centuries. These include massage therapy, acupuncture, yoga, meditation and visualization, to name a few. They are thought to strengthen the communication between the mind and the body. They may help relieve some of the physical symptoms of depression such as frequent fatigue, headaches, backaches and vague aches and pains.

Activity Sheet: Activity 2, *Visualization***Treatment: Diet**

While diet probably will not be the only treatment you receive for depression, it is important to have a healthy diet in conjunction with other forms of therapy. A healthy balanced diet is essential for overall health, mood and energy. A poor diet can contribute to stressful eating which can result in more stress, especially if the food is poor in nutrient quality and you start gaining weight. This can present a vicious cycle.

For example, B vitamins control mood and are needed for thousands of chemical processes that the body controls every day. Omega-3 fatty acids are the "feel good" fats. A lack of iron can make you feel very tired and sluggish. The closer the food came from nature, the better it is for you!

Treatment: Pet Therapy

Pet therapy may help with mild to moderate depression. Pets can combat loneliness and give unconditional love. Studies show that pet ownership increases social contact, especially when you walk your pet on a regular basis. Increased physical activity (by walking dogs) can lead to better fitness levels, fewer sick days and doctor's visits and better sleep.

You must be able to take care of yourself if you are considering owning a pet for therapy purposes. If you can't take care of yourself, you more than likely won't be able to take care of an animal. Pet therapy should not be a consideration for those who aren't "pet people" to begin with.

Treatment: Electromagnetic Stimulation

Electromagnetic stimulation is a treatment option for those with severe or chronic depression. It is usually for those who don't respond to medication or other treatments and those who are suicidal. This form of treatment can be beneficial to older adults who are unable to take depression medication due to heart disease.

Vagus nerve stimulator (VNS): A pulse generator is inserted into the left upper chest area during surgery. The pulse generator is activated by your doctor after several weeks.

- Side effects include coughing, throat pain, hoarseness or slight voice changes and shortness of breath. There is the chance that it can make the depression worse.

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT): Electrical currents pass through the brain which triggers a seizure. It usually offers fast and effective relief from symptoms. The procedure (in or outpatient) takes 10 to 15 minutes, and the patient is put under brief general anesthesia.

- Side effects include confusion (few moments to several hours), memory loss, vomiting and muscle or jaw pain.

Conclusion

While there are many options available for treatment, it is best to speak with a trained professional when seeking help for depression. Don't be afraid to reach out for help from those around you. You may be surprised to find that there are many others struggling with depression as well.

Resources

- <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression/complete-index.shtml>
- <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/>
- <http://www.womenshealth.gov/faq/depression-pregnancy.cfm>
- http://www.helpguide.org/mental/depression_tips.htm
- http://www.depression.com/p_activity2.html
- <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/depression>
- http://www.depression.com/how_antidepressants_work.html
- <http://www.webmd.com/depression/DS00175>
- http://www.depression.com/web_resources.html
- <http://www.narsad.org/dc/depression/index.html>