

Depression

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Most people experience feelings of depression periodically. Depressed emotions are normal, particularly in the event of loss. The changes in physical functioning associated with PD can be experienced as “a loss,” and this can, in turn, precipitate feelings of depression. However, for people with PD, depression is often more complex because it can also be part of a variety of psychiatric conditions related to the underlying brain changes in PD.

Depressive Emotions and Depressive Disorders

In general, the term “depression” refers to an emotion characterized by sad and unhappy feelings. However, it is not uncommon for people to use the term depression somewhat loosely, when they are really experiencing a range of other emotions including feelings of anger, disgust, anxiety, apathy, fear, or tiredness. The key features of a “depressive disorder” are a sad mood and/or the inability to enjoy or be interested in activities that would ordinarily be pleasurable. In addition, the sad feelings are usually persistent and pervasive. For example, having to stop working because of PD can be an understandable cause for feelings of sadness and discouragement. However, in the absence of a depressive disorder, the person is able to continue to pursue and achieve satisfaction from other activities; the sadness does not color virtually all aspects of life.

In depressive disorders, continuous negative thoughts, especially about oneself, or morbid thoughts about death (especially one's own), and excessive and inappropriate feelings of guilt are very common. While it may be normal to feel guilt over past mistakes, sadness over losses, or resentment because of the impact of PD on daily functioning, in the setting of a depressive disorder these feelings become a preoccupying source of distress. There may be significant anxiety as a feature of a depressive disorder, although anxiety disorders are fairly common in PD and can also be present independent of depressive disturbances.

Both general feelings of depression and PD-related depressive disorders often involve similar cognitive and physical symptoms.

Cognitive symptoms can include problems with:

- concentration
- attention
- multi-tasking
- slowed thinking

Physical symptoms can include:

- fatigue
- low energy
- slowed movements
- aches and pains
- decreased appetite
- sleep disturbances

Many of these symptoms also occur in PD without an accompanying depression, but they tend to be worse when the patient has an untreated depressive disorder and may lead to an increased level of disability. In fact, when patients describe a degree of disability that is far greater than their motor examination suggests, it is important to look for signs of a depressive disorder. Successful treatment of depression can improve thinking deficits, fatigue, and slowness. Patients are also better able to pursue regular exercise and other compensatory strategies (such as monitoring the pace of daily activities) that can maximize functioning.

One important clue to the presence of a depressive disorder is the inability to effectively respond at an emotional or behavioral level to life's challenges, including those brought on by PD. Many people think that mood disorders result from a lack of coping skills or weak character, but this is not true. With PD (or any chronic illness), successful coping and adaptation are virtually impossible in the face of an untreated mood disorder. Individuals who are ordinarily resilient and resourceful when faced with adversity will often say, "I keep trying, but I just can't keep my chin up." Recognition of this state may be more difficult for those who normally cope well. These individuals are likely to try their best to carry on with daily activities despite their untreated mood disorders.

Treatment

When identified and properly diagnosed and treated, most depressive symptoms can be treated successfully, providing patients with improved quality of life and reducing disability.

The combination of psychotherapy and medication has been shown to be the most effective treatment for depressive disorders. Antidepressant medications are generally indicated when depressive disorders persist and are contributing to significant distress and dysfunction. Once a depressive disorder is treated, the person is usually better able to face the challenges associated with PD, respond to encouragement, develop ways to compensate satisfactorily, and take advantage of new opportunities. In fact, such changes are often taken as signs that the mood disorder is responding to treatment.

It is important to know that an underlying diagnosis of depression in PD can be missed because many of the symptoms of depression are also common symptoms seen in PD (for example, lack of facial expression or extreme fatigue). Therefore, clear descriptive communication with your doctor about how you are feeling emotionally is essential so the doctor can then determine why these feelings might be occurring and provide proper treatment.