WHAT CAN I DO?

When someone with a chronic physical illness also experiences depression, it is important to treat both the illness and the depression concurrently.

Treating depression in those with a chronic illness is similar to treating depression in other people. Early diagnosis and treatment can reduce the risk of complications and suicide, as well as reduce distress and improve quality of life.

If the symptoms of depression are related to the chronic illness or result from medication side effects, treatment may need to be changed or adjusted. If the depression is a separate problem, it can be treated independently.

If you suspect that a client you are working with may be experiencing or developing depression, seek the advice of a mental health professional.

This brochure is intended to provide general information only. Specific advice should be sought from an appropriately qualified professional.

The Australian College of Mental Health Nurses, its officers and others involved in the production and dissemination of this brochure shall not be held responsible for any actions or their results taken as a result of the information provided herein.
Several chronic illnesses have been associated with depression, including:
- stroke
- cancer
- dementia
- chronic pain
- asthma
- heart disease
- Parkinson’s disease
- diabetes
- arthritis.

In people with a chronic physical illness, depression makes management and recovery more difficult, as it can make it harder for people to find the energy to exercise, eat healthily or take medication at required times.

Any illness can trigger depression, however the risk of becoming depressed increases with the severity of the physical illness and level of disruption to life that it causes.

Often the symptoms of depression are overlooked by people with a chronic physical illness and their families, assuming that feeling depressed is normal for someone with a chronic illness.

Some symptoms of depression are also symptoms of chronic physical illnesses, which makes it harder to decide whether they are due to depression or to the chronic illness.

Common symptoms of depression include:
- Loss of interest or pleasure in daily activities or a depressed mood
- Sleep disturbances
- Problems with concentration
- Loss of appetite
- Feelings of guilt or worthlessness
- Apathy
- Loss of energy or fatigue
- Repeated thoughts of suicide or death.

Estimates of chronic illnesses and depression rates:
- Parkinson’s disease
  - 40% experience depression
- Multiple sclerosis
  - 40% experience depression
- Stroke
  - 10%–27% experience depression
- Cancer
  - 25% experience depression
- Diabetes
  - 25% experience depression
- Chronic pain syndrome
  - 30%–54% experience depression
- Coronary artery disease
  - 18%–20% experience depression

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