Chronic illness and depression

There are a number of chronic physical illnesses that have been associated with depression and research suggests that over 40% of Australians with a mental illness also have a chronic physical illness. Moreover, having a chronic physical illness greatly increases the risk of a person developing depression.

Stroke, cancer, dementia, Parkinson’s disease, chronic pain, asthma, heart disease, diabetes and arthritis are all chronic physical illnesses that have been associated with depression.

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.

A chronic physical illness can make it seem like an effort to keep in touch with friends and family. This can make the person feel isolated and make it harder to recover from depression. 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.

Estimates of chronic physical illnesses and depression rates

- Parkinson’s disease: 40% experience depression
- Multiple sclerosis: 40%
- Stroke: 10%-27%
- Cancer: 25%
- Diabetes: 25%
- Chronic pain syndrome: 30%-54%

Symptoms

Often the symptoms of depression are overlooked by people with a chronic physical illness and their families, who assume 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. When someone with a chronic physical illness is depressed, it is important to treat the illness and depression at the same time.

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.

Treatment

There are a number of treatments that can be effective for people with both a chronic physical illness and depression. Psychological therapy is an important part of treatment. Medication (antidepressants) may also be used.

Psychological treatments:

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is one of the most researched psychological therapies with a lot of evidence to support its effectiveness in treating people with anxiety disorders and depression. It teaches people to examine their thought patterns and change the way they react to certain situations.

Interpersonal Therapy (IPT) has also been widely researched and found to be effective for those with depression. It helps people find new ways to resolve losses, conflict and changes and to get along with others.

Medication

When a person experiences moderate to severe episodes of depression, antidepressant medication is often prescribed, alongside psychological treatments. Antidepressants may also be prescribed when other treatments have not proved helpful. Of course, all medications being taken (including all prescribed and over the counter medications, as well as herbal/natural remedies) need to be reviewed by a doctor before antidepressants are prescribed, to reduce the risk of side effects or medication interactions.

References


Cleveland Clinic 2007, Chronic illness and depression, http://www.clevelandclinic.org/health/health-info/docs/2200/2282.asp


Mental Health Nurses (MHNs) are experts in working with people who experience mental illness. They work collaboratively with consumers, carers and other health professionals, across a range of health and mental health settings. MHNs take a holistic approach and are skilled in assessment, treatment and ongoing support of the person, with a focus on achieving wellness.