POST-STROKE DEPRESSION AFFECTS CAREGIVERS TOO

Depression is a real problem that can affect anyone, especially stroke survivors. However, stroke survivors are not alone in experiencing depression, an estimated 20 percent of family caregivers also suffer from depression. Generally, women caregivers have a higher rate of depression, almost double that of male caregivers. About 12 million women experience clinical depression each year, but many of these women do not seek treatment because of either embarrassment or denial. According to the Family Caregiver Alliance, male caregivers are less likely to admit to depression and they are more likely to self-treat their symptoms of depression by overworking or consuming alcohol. Though they are more likely to hire help with home care duties, male caregivers have smaller social networks for support compared to female caregivers.

Caregivers may have feelings of anger, guilt and sadness about their situation. They may worry that they are not doing the right things, or they may feel lonely and resent their new role. These feelings are not uncommon for caregivers to experience and it is important for them to pay attention to how caregiving is affecting them. It is also important for the caregiver to talk about their negative emotions and for their healthcare provider to acknowledge that feelings of depression are not a sign of personal weakness.

The checklist to the right is from the RESCUE fact sheet called “Caregiver Stress and Depression.” If a caregiver experiences five or more of the listed signs and symptoms of depression for more than two weeks, it is suggested that they consult a member of their healthcare team.

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) has several recommendations to assist caregivers, both male and female, in dealing with depression:

1) set realistic goals and take on reasonable responsibilities, 
2) break down large tasks into smaller ones, 
3) spend time with others instead of being alone, 
4) hold off on making important decisions such as moving or changing jobs, 
5) participate in mood elevating activities such as exercising or attending social events, and 
6) accept that feeling better will take some time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sadness or an “empty” mood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling guilty, worthless, or helpless</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problems concentrating, remembering, or making decisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in eating habits and/or weight changes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling hopeless</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of energy or feeling tried and “slowed down”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problems with sleep: Trouble getting to sleep, staying asleep, or sleeping too much</td>
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<tr>
<td>Easily angered or irritable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wanting to be alone or spending much time alone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities, including sex, that were once enjoyed</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

PLEASE NOTE: The above checklist is NOT intended to provide a complete assessment or diagnosis for any condition. It is simply to be used to help identify symptoms and assist the individual in determining if they should seek further evaluation by a physician or a mental health professional.
POST-STROKE DEPRESSION IN THE STROKE SURVIVOR

“Post-stroke depression [PSD] is very common among stroke survivors,” says Dr. Huanguang Jia, a Research Health Scientist at the VA Rehabilitation Outcomes Research Center. “Approximately 25% to 40% of stroke patients have PSD, which has been associated with worse functional outcomes and increased post-stroke mortality.” Findings from Dr. Jia’s research in stroke and depression have shown that patients with post-stroke depression had longer length of stays, and more impatient and outpatient visits. According to Dr. Jia, “Timely screening/diagnosis [for depression] is important in order to provide appropriate and effective treatment for the patient, which can improve functional recovery, quality of life, and utilization of health services, and can reduce medical costs.” Though screening for depression is routine, Dr. Jia emphasized how vital it is to the process of post-stroke recovery.

To read more about Dr. Jia’s work and VA research about post-stroke depression, please see:


RESCUE FACT SHEET SPOTLIGHT: “DEPRESSION AFTER STROKE”

The RESCUE project fact sheet titled “Depression after Stroke” contains information to educate the caregiver about post-stroke depression, signs and symptoms to look for in the stroke survivor, and why it important to seek treatment for post-stroke depression.

The following are helpful tips for caregivers about dealing with post-stroke depression and the stroke survivor:

- Know the warning signals of depression, watch for them, and get help quickly if you recognize the signs and symptoms.
- Be patient with your loved one. After a stroke, it will take time for your loved one to understand the changes.
- Help your loved one exercise and take part in fun activities.
- Encourage friends and your family to visit and talk with your loved one.
- Have a good attitude. Focus on how much your stroke survivor can do.
- Smile and relax about things you can’t change.

This fact sheet also offers information about treatment options for stroke patients suffering with depression, such as psychotherapy, support groups, and medications. In addition, the fact sheet lists Web addresses and telephone numbers for helpful stroke resources, such as:

- American Stroke Association (ASA) www.strokeassociation.org
- Family Caregiver Alliance (FCA) www.caregiver.org
- National Stroke Association (NSA) www.stroke.org
- National Association of Area Agencies on Aging www.n4a.org

Next Month’s Topic: "LIFE AFTER STROKE"
MY HEALTH eVET DEPRESSION SCREENING TOOL

One of the valuable tools available to users of the VA health portal My HealtheVet is the 9 question Patient Health Questionnaire, also known as the PHQ-9. This interactive tool can help both providers and site visitors to assess signs and symptoms of depression. While this screening tool is not designed to provide a comprehensive assessment and diagnosis of depression, the PHQ-9 screening tool can be a first step in identifying the need to seek help from a qualified physician or mental health provider for a complete assessment and diagnosis, and appropriate treatment for depression.

Learn more about the PHQ-9 interactive depression screening tool on the My HealtheVet Web by clicking the RESEARCH HEALTH tab, then MENTAL HEALTH. You will find the link for the PHQ-9 Depression Screening in the Screening Tools section.

American Stroke Association

A caregiver’s emotional and psychological health can affect their physical health, and in turn, affect their ability to provide care to the stroke survivor. The American Stroke Association Web site contains great information to help providers, caregivers and family members understand and deal with the challenges of stroke caregiving.

One very valuable article lists the eight “Signs of Caregiver Burnout.” Recognizing these signs and getting a caregiver the help needed benefits both the loved one being cared for, and the caregiver.

To see the “Signs of Caregiver Burnout” visit the American Stroke Association Web site: http://www.strokeassociation.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3042559

Did You Know?

- Post-stroke depression prevents almost as many stroke patients from returning to work as physical disability.
- About 44 million Americans provide 37 billion hours of unpaid, "informal" care each year for adult family members and friends with chronic illnesses or conditions that prevent them from handling daily activities.
- In 2007, the estimated economic value of family caregivers’ unpaid contributions was at least $375 billion, which is how much it would cost to replace that care with paid services.

Links In This Issue

RESCE Web Site
Huanguang Jia, PhD Research
http://www.rorc.research.va.gov/rescue
http://www.rorc.research.va.gov/investigators/investigator.cfm?Person_ID=1030037638&LName=Jia
http://www.myhealth.va.gov
https://www.myhealth.va.gov/mhvPortal/anonymous.portal?_nfpb=true&_pageLabel=mentalHealth&contentPage=mh_screening_tools/PHQ_SCREENING.HTML

VA My HealtheVet
PHQ-9 Depression Screening Tool
http://www.myhealth.va.gov/mhvPortal/anonymous.portal?_nfpb=true&_pageLabel=mentalHealth&contentPage=mh_screening_tools/PHQ_SCREENING.HTML

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National Association of Area Agencies on Aging
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Citations referenced in this Newsletter can be found in the Web version @ www.rorc.research.va.gov/rescue

http://www.rorc.research.va.gov/rescue
Web-Based Informational Materials for Caregivers of Veterans Post-Stroke
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Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI)

Connie Uphold, Principal Investigator
Connie.Uphold@va.gov

RESCUE Newsletter Editorial Team:
Kristen Wing, Benjamin Lee, Kimberly Findley, and Jini Hanjian
Graphic Design by Lindsay Knauff