Depression Is a Serious Mental Illness

Margaret Strock

In the following excerpt from a pamphlet put out by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), mental health writer Margaret Strock provides a general overview of depressive illnesses, their symptoms, treatments, and effects on men, women, children, and the elderly. Depression is common in the United States, Strock explains, and has different forms, each of which has its own set of symptoms and treatments. In addition, depression manifests itself in various ways among groups: women, for instance, tend to experience depression differently than men. Though the illness is common, Strock writes, people can be reluctant to seek treatment, sometimes for fear they will appear weak. Margaret Strock writes on health subjects for the Public Communication and Information Branch of the NIMH, a federal agency, which is a division of the National Institutes of Health.

In any given 1-year period, 9.5 percent of the population, or about 18.8 million American adults, suffer from a depressive illness. The economic cost for this disorder is high, but the cost in human suffering cannot be estimated. Depressive illnesses often interfere with normal functioning and cause pain and suffering not only to those who have a disorder, but also to those who care about them. Serious depression can destroy family life as well as the life of the ill person. But much of this suffering is unnecessary.

Most people with a depressive illness do not seek treatment, although the great majority, even those whose depression is extremely severe can be helped. Thanks to years of fruitful research, there are now medications and psychosocial

therapies such as cognitive/behavioral, “talk,” or interpersonal that ease the pain of depression.

Unfortunately, many people do not recognize that depression is a treatable illness. If you feel that you or someone you care about is one of the many undiagnosed depressed people in this country, the information presented here may help you take the steps that may save your own or someone else’s life.

Defining Depressive Disorders

A depressive disorder is an illness that involves the body, mood, and thoughts. It affects the way a person eats and sleeps, the way one feels about oneself, and the way one thinks about things. A depressive disorder is not the same as a passing blue mood. It is not a sign of personal weakness or a condition that can be willed or wished away. People with a depressive illness cannot merely “pull themselves together” and get better. Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months, or years. Appropriate treatment, however, can help most people who suffer from depression.

Depressive disorders come in different forms, just as is the case with other illnesses such as heart disease. This pamphlet briefly describes three of the most common types of depressive disorders. However, within these types there are variations in the number of symptoms, their severity, and persistence.

Major depression is manifested by a combination of symptoms that interfere with the ability to work, study, sleep, eat, and enjoy once pleasurable activities. Such a disabling episode of depression may occur only once but more commonly occurs several times in a lifetime.

A less severe type of depression, dysthymia, involves long-term, chronic symptoms that do not disable, but keep one from functioning well or from feeling good. Many people with dysthymia also experience major depressive episodes at some time in their lives.