Dementia vs. Depression: What’s the Difference?

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Dementia vs. Depression

Maybe you have not been feeling like yourself lately. Maybe you have noticed some differences emerge, and important people in your life have seen some changes, too. Even before you know what is happening, you begin to worry. You begin jumping to conclusions about what is wrong, and what can be done about it. Adding to the difficulty of your situation is the notion that there are so many medical conditions affecting those in older adulthood. Trying to look up symptoms for one can take you on a never-ending journey from one diagnosis to another. This occurs because multiple conditions can have overlapping signs and symptoms. Before long, you even struggle to remember what your symptoms were initially. If you are experiencing mood changes, it can be difficult to determine if it is dementia vs. depression.

These conditions can share many symptoms of each other that distort one’s perception and confuse the diagnosis. It can be overwhelming.

Do not succumb to this sense of being overwhelmed though. Pushing towards the accurate information is the only way to get the treatment you deserve.

Depression Explained

Depression is a serious mental health condition that can present at any stage in life. Just because you have not had depression during your adolescence, early adulthood and middle adulthood does not mean you are immune to the condition.

In fact, symptoms of depression are known to emerge later due to a number of life changes and stressors. Whether depression presents early or later in life, many of the symptoms will be constant. These symptoms include:

- Low mood or increased irritability.
- Decreased motivation.
- Lack of interest in enjoyable activities.
- Lower energy.
- Excessive feelings of guilt or worthlessness.
- Changes in sleep marked by sleeping too much or sleeping too little.
- Changes in appetite.
- Thoughts of death.
- Decreased ability to concentrate.

Adding to the confusion is the idea that many of these symptoms may present as normal signs of aging. People may think the lower motivation and increased thoughts of death come with old age, which makes identifying dementia vs. depression problematic. Depressive symptoms will occur more days than not for a period of at least

two weeks.

Dementia Explained

The other side of this coin is dementia, which is a condition caused when brain cells become damaged. Dementia is a blanket term used to discuss a range of conditions related to thinking and memory problems.

Alzheimer's is the most common form of dementia and accounts for 60% to 80% of all dementia cases. Vascular dementia, the second most common form, is easier to identify because it presents after a stroke. Someone working to recognize Alzheimer's will look for signs like:

- Significant memory loss.
- Increased difficulty with planning or problem solving.
- Trouble with common chores and tasks.
- Lack of orientation to time or place.
- Problems with visual understanding.
- Difficulty with written or verbal speech.
- Losing important items.
- Declining judgment.
- Increased isolation.
- New or unexpected changes in mood and character.

Unfortunately, there is no test, scan, or bloodwork to determine the presence of Alzheimer's with certainty. Due to this, the individual and their support network must track any perceived changes in functioning and report this information to a medical professional. This information combined with a thorough medical history and current physical examination will shape the diagnosis.

Knowing the Interaction

If you still are struggling with depression vs. dementia, you should consider that these conditions are not mutually exclusive.

They can co-occur, and they do so at high rates with as many as 40% of people with Alzheimer's having depression as well. This likelihood increases when someone's Alzheimer's is more advanced.

Depression in people with dementia may have some noticeable differences from other depression. These differences include:

- Lower level of intensity with fewer symptoms.
- Symptoms that change more often with less consistency.
- Less focus on death and suicide.

Additionally, the person with dementia may have a decreased ability to describe their experience due to the cognitive limitations. Many of these signs will have to be observed by others.

Treating Depression and Dementia

When it comes time to taking steps towards treatment, being efficient with your resources will be key. These are tips that target depression, dementia, or both:

- **Schedule and routines.** Schedules and routines will build motivation to address depression while adding structure to a life with declining memory. With routines, there is less reliance on memory. Setting an hour-by-hour plan for the day can be a powerful step.
- **Support groups.** Support groups are gatherings of people in a similar situation as you with the goal of better understanding your condition as you gain a sense of fellowship and community. The process may

be uncomfortable, but the outcomes will speak for themselves. Check with your doctor and local organizations about availability.

- **Get moving.** Exercise is not a cure for all that ails you, but it can make a huge difference in the way you feel. Aside from the long list of physical health benefits, the release of desirable chemicals into the brain from exercise will leave you feeling energized and more focused throughout the day.
- **Emphasize openness.** For some, speaking to significant people in their life on a daily basis is second nature. For you, it might not be natural, but it is an important way to build strong relationships that will carry you through your condition.
- **Find the fun.** When a serious mental or medical condition enters your life, the tone normally shifts to something more somber and heavy. Any healthy life requires balance though, so for every moment spent thinking about the burden of your condition, there must be time doing the activities you enjoy with the people you love and cherish.

Separately, depression vs. dementia are problematic conditions that affect millions of people directly and indirectly. By acknowledging the symptoms of each and their potential interaction, one can seek out the needed care.

Along the way, finding treatments that work well for each condition will ensure your resources are spent wisely.