

Alternative Healing for Depression in Elderly Adults



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Most everyone has felt sad or depressed at times. In the self-help section of any bookstore there are many titles that strive to help individuals deal with their moods. There are compilations of stories to inspire and sympathize with emotions and life's tough situations. Feeling depressed is a reaction to loss, life struggles or going through rough times, and an injured self-esteem. When feelings of intense sadness, including helplessness, hopelessness, and worthlessness, last for days or weeks at a time, and start to keep you from functioning normally, then you may have *clinical depression*. Clinical Depression is a growing problem in the human populace today. Nearly 10% of Americans suffer from depression each year¹. Of that number, 6 million cases of depression are seen in elderly Americans age 65 and older².

Depression in Elders: Causes and Effects

As we age, we may begin to fear death, either because of regrets, or spiritual beliefs. Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, an award-winning author, lecturer, instructor and medical facility director, has spent her life studying the natural phenomenon of death and how people react to it individually. She has developed a theory that points out "five stages of grief" individuals use to deal with death³. Dr. Kübler-Ross' fourth stage is titled *Depression*. In this stage, depression refers to as preparatory grieving. In a way it is preparing for what is inevitable: death. As an elder, death can seem so much closer and therefore, terrifying. Dr. Kübler-Ross, in her book On Death and Dying (1969)⁴, expresses how it is natural to feel sadness and regret, fear, uncertainty, etc. This stage shows that the person has begun to accept the reality, and inevitability, of death.

Death is only one trigger for depression in older adults. According to WebMD⁵, depression later in life coexists with the effects of multiple medical illnesses or injuries and disabilities. Our elders are usually on different medications for a variety of ailments in their bodies. The presence of chronic or severe pain can create feelings of anxiety and helplessness. Certain medicines or combinations of medicines may cause depression. Damage to body image through weight gain or loss, amputation, scars from surgery or injury may also lead to a lower self-esteem.

Some people would define old age as the time when life stops giving us things and starts taking them away. Elders are faced with loss much more than other age groups. They must work out retirement plans and relocate from "home" to an alien place for residence and care. Depression may develop from extreme grief caused by such changes in circumstances. The more common circumstances that increase depression in the elderly are: being single, unmarried, divorced, or widowed, a lack in supportive social network, and stressful events. Living alone and social isolation can lead to depression.

¹ Statistics from Silverthorne, Dee Unglaub, et. al. *Human Physiology and Integrative Approach*. Fifth Edition. San Francisco, CA: Pearson Education Inc. 2010, pg. 322.

² Statistic from WebMD site at <http://www.webmd.com/depression/default.htm> for more details on depression in elders.

³ See the *Elizabeth Kübler-Ross Foundation* at <http://www.ekrfoundation.org/bio> for more information.

⁴ Information from Kübler-Ross, Elizabeth, M.D. *On Death and Dying*. New York, NY: Touchstone, 1969.

⁵ See WebMD site at <http://www.webmd.com/depression/default.htm> for more details on depression in elders.

Studies have shown that depression lasts longer in the elderly. Long-term depression will result in an imbalance in hormone transfers⁶. This in turn increases the risk for other physical illnesses within their cardiac and immune systems. According to WebMD⁷, studies conducted in nursing homes have concluded that residents who suffer from depression have a substantially increased likelihood of death from physical illness (es).

Issues with Anti-Depressants for Elders

According to WebMD⁸, Risk for side effects from using antidepressants in elderly adults is high because of the aging body. Elderly people are more sensitive to medicines. Anti-depressants can be sedating or cause a sudden drop in blood pressure. Therefore, when elders are presented with the option to take anti-depressant medicines, the patient may refuse to take them. Also, having other illnesses at the same time as depression can interfere with the effectiveness of anti-depressant medicines.

Alternative Methods for Elders to Better Deal with Depression: Aromatherapy and Therapeutic Yoga

Aromatherapy

Research and clinical studies today show the positive effects of aromatherapy such as the antiseptic and antibiotic powers of essential oils and their allopathic (disease-countering) properties⁹. Aromatherapy is based on holistic principles, treating the whole person, not just the symptoms. The emphasis is on strengthening the body's immune system. Essential oils are chosen to improve physical and emotional well-being. The popular oils used include lavender (soothing, calming), rosemary (stimulating) and tea tree (antiseptic)¹⁰. Aromatherapy works well with pain management, aftercare healing, immune boosting, and calming of the body and mind of the individual¹¹. Many elders have a higher risk for infection due to the decrease in the defense of the immune system, illnesses, medications, and even surgeries. The antiseptic properties found in plants are used in medicines. However, aromatic oils have denser properties of the immune boosting chemicals Pharmaceutical companies want in their medicines. Look into education programs that provide sampling of aromatic oils and their benefits.

Therapeutic Yoga

Scientists have found many benefits of yoga. Yoga tones muscles, tissues, ligaments, joints, and nerves, relaxes body and mind, reduces stress and anxiety, develops trust and teamwork, increased flexibility and body awareness, alleviates pain, and helps individuals work through symptoms of depression¹². All of these in some form are usual ailments for our elders. Finding a way to incorporate therapeutic yoga within healthcare facilities, long-term care, and therapy practices could help elders heal, regain strength and manage pain and stress.

The creator of Iyengar yoga¹³, B.K.S Iyengar, quoted "Yoga helps integrate the mental and physical plane, and it offers a sense of inner and outer balance, or alignment. True alignment means

⁶ Information gathered Silverthorne, Dee Unglaub, et. al. *Human Physiology and Integrative Approach*. Fifth Edition. San Francisco, CA: Pearson Education Inc., 2010, pg. 322.

⁷ See WebMD site at <http://www.webmd.com/depression/default.htm> for more details.

⁸ See WebMD site at <http://www.webmd.com/depression/default.htm> for more details.

⁹ Information gathered from Hoare Joanna, *The Complete Aromatherapy Tutor*. Great Britain: Octopus Publishing Group, 2010. Pg.14.

¹⁰ Information gathered from Hoare Joanna, *The Complete Aromatherapy Tutor*. Great Britain: Octopus Publishing Group, 2010. Pg.14.

¹¹ Information gathered from Hoare Joanna, *The Complete Aromatherapy Tutor*. Great Britain: Octopus Publishing Group, 2010. Pg.14.

¹² Information gathered from lecture on Therapeutic Yoga on October 6th, 2010 by Cross Country Education (www.crosscountryeducation.com) Lecturer Julie Whitbeck, OTR/L, CYT.

¹³ Iyengar yoga is a style of yoga that promotes strength, flexibility, endurance, and balance through coordinated breathing and poses. Iyengar yoga encourages the use of yoga props.

that the inner mind reaches every cell and fiber of the body”¹⁴. The true meaning of yoga is derived from its name. The word *yoga* is derived from the root word *yuj* which literally means “to join”, “to yoke”, or “to unite” in the ancient Indian language called Sanskrit¹⁵. Yoga then, refers to the union of the individual self with the universal self. From a westerner’s point of view, this means the union of the body, mind, and spirit. Yoga is a holistic practice, a philosophy and practice created by Chinese, Tibetan, Mayan and Indian monks about 4000 B.C.¹⁶ Today, yoga has become a topic of therapeutic and preventative science¹⁷. Yoga is *not* a religion. Rather, the practice of yoga can help one to become more spiritual in his, or her, own religious practice!

Adaptations for Therapeutic Yoga to Help Elders

Yoga has become popular in the western world only in the last decade. When you think of yoga, you probably imagine headstands, and crazy pretzel like twists of the body. Maybe you are intimidated by the limber, skinny, and young bodies that are depicted in magazines doing such yoga poses. Now how do you think someone with even more risk for multiple medical illnesses or injuries and disabilities would feel about trying yoga? It is important to remember that there are many yoga studios in the United States dedicated to adaptive yoga for the needs of elders and those suffering from illnesses and injuries. Present yoga as exercises geared toward better breathing practices and body strength and flexibility. Explain the benefits of such a practice. Have the adaptive equipment suitable for those with limited mobility or debilitating illnesses. For example, Chair Yoga is the most common form of adaptive yoga. All postures are changed in a way that an individual can perform them seated in a chair.

Conclusion

Depression affects a large number of America’s elderly population. This is an issue faced by elders and their families. Depression affects health physically, emotionally, mentally, which makes day to day activities extremely challenging. The antidepressants may be too risky for the elderly to use; older adults have an increased sensitivity to medications. By their own choice, elders may not want to use antidepressants because of the stigma accorded to mental illness and sadness. Our elders face many life changing decisions in their personal lives that may cause the symptoms of depression. How then, do we help those individuals?

Current scientific research has looked into the alternative methods of healing that have a more holistic approach to healing. Those methods are therapeutic yoga and aromatherapy. Both methods have been found to decrease the symptoms of depression by increasing the fighting power of the immune system, strengthen and relax the body, help with pain management and calm anxiety. There are many adaptations for yoga that enable those with multiple illnesses or disabilities to perform yoga practices. Such adaptations are the increased use of yoga tools to easily and comfortably help an individual into certain yoga poses. Both yoga and aromatherapy are healing methods that have been used for thousands of years. So give them a try!

¹⁴ Quote from teacher training at CorePower Yoga January-May 2009.

¹⁵ Info gathered from lecture on Therapeutic Yoga on October 6th, 2010 by Cross Country Education (www.crosscountryeducation.com) Lecturer Julie Whitbeck, OTR/L, CYT.

¹⁶ Info gathered from teacher training at CorePower Yoga January-May 2009.

¹⁷ Info gathered from lecture on Therapeutic Yoga on October 6th, 2010 by Cross Country Education (www.crosscountryeducation.com) Lecturer Julie Whitbeck, OTR/L, CYT.

For more information on Depression, and Depression in Elders visit:

<http://www.webmd.com/depression/default.htm>

<http://vsearch.nlm.nih.gov/vivisimo/cgi-bin/query-meta?v%3Aproject=medlineplus&query=depression>

For more information on Therapeutic Yoga in Colorado visit:

<http://www.namasteworksyoga.com>

<http://www.therapeuticyoga.net>

<http://www.yogatherapycs.com/>

<http://www.seniorfitness.net/YOGA.htm>

<http://www.silverageyoga.org/>

For more information on Aromatherapy visit:

<http://www.oil-testimonials.com/981469>

<http://sabinabrunner.vibrantscents.com/>

<http://sabinabrunner.marketingscents.com/>