

Aging Happens: Program gives seniors tools to counter feelings of depression

By Ellen Waldman

June 22, 2015

We all might have times of sadness, or even depression, but for some older adults, depression is often undiagnosed, misdiagnosed and/or untreated. This is not a small problem, as depression in the elderly can have very serious consequences.

Depressed older adults may describe physical complaints, such as increased aches and pains, headaches, weakness and, commonly, trouble sleeping. Increases in anxiety, irritability, withdrawal and a decrease in attention to appearance are also common signs.

Gary Moak, president of the American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry and a professor at the University of Massachusetts Medical School says, "as many as 40 percent of stroke victims will develop depression, because many [strokes] occur in an area of the brain that's closely related to the processing and management of emotions."

Overall, about one in five people age 65 and older has depression, according to Moak. Older adults commit 20 percent of all suicides, while representing only 13 percent of the population.

What do we have here locally to address this situation? Fortunately, the Rogue Valley Council of Governments (RVCOG) has adopted a program called PEARLS (Program to Encourage Active Rewarding LiveS) specifically targeting people 55 years and older, to meet these challenges in their lives.

Here's what I learned from Susan Jay Rounds, PEARLS coordinator.

1. What problem does this program address and why was it developed?

PEARLS was designed to address the most common mental health problem among older adults — depression — specifically minor depression and dysthymia (a mild but long-term, chronic form of depression). In older adults and individuals with chronic illnesses, depression may also lead to worsening of physical symptoms, difficulty following medical treatment or practicing self-care activities, increased hospital visits and poorer health overall. Treatments such as PEARLS can have a positive impact on improving a person's quality of life.

2. How was this program developed to help older adults?

The PEARLS program was developed by researchers at the Health Promotion Research Center (HPRC) at the University of Washington. In a random, controlled study conducted by HPRC researchers between 1999 to 2003, seniors participating in the PEARLS program were three times as likely to experience a decrease in depressive symptoms and an increase in accomplishments and hope as those not in the PEARLS program. PEARLS is a free program offered by Senior and Disabilities Services.

3. How is this program structured?

The program involves meeting for six to eight sessions with a PEARLS counselor in the participant's home for about one hour. PEARLS teaches people how to recognize the symptoms of depression and learn a practical, empowering seven-step method to solve problems associated with their depression. Participants learn how to break problems down into smaller, bite-size pieces. Another core PEARLS principle is that pleasant and physical activities decrease depressive symptoms. In each session, participants are encouraged to engage in those activities that fit their situation. Meeting with a PEARLS counselor is like having a problem-solving buddy and activities coach.

4. Who is eligible for this program?

Adults age 55 and older who have minor depression and dysthymia are eligible. PEARLS is also effective with older adults experiencing major depression, if they are also taking anti-depressants. Each person referred to the program receives a PEARLS screening to determine if the program would be beneficial. If PEARLS is not a good fit, the coordinator will refer the person to other appropriate resources, including mental health and community programs.

For more information, contact Susan Jay Rounds, PEARLS coordinator, at 541-423-1363 or email sjayrounds@rvcog.org. As the PEARLS coordinator, she manages all aspects of the program, including providing screenings, in-home counseling sessions, outreach to community partners, referrals to appropriate resources and demographic and program data reports.

There is every reason to avail yourself of this no-cost, in-home counseling program, in order to learn skills that improve your quality of life. As its handout states, "PEARLS helps create active, rewarding lives for seniors with minor depression." This is a goal within everyone's reach now.