

Don't let clouds dim golden years

NASSAWADOX – Retirement is often referred to as the golden years, but sometimes dark clouds – in the form of depression – roll in and dim the view.

There's no reason to suffer, though. "In most instances it's treatable," said Susan Scheuring, director of Shore Psychiatric Services, which operates out of Shore Memorial Hospital, and of the Senior Perspectives program, both in Nassawadox.

Depression affects an estimated 15 percent of people over 65, according to the American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry. But it's not a normal part of getting older and it should be treated – no matter what the age. The key is to do something before it settles in too deeply. "You want to try to get a handle on it as soon as possible because nobody should feel bad a lot of the time," Scheuring said.

Signs of depression include sudden or drastic changes. "Someone who gains or loses 10 pounds in a month's time should be looked at," Scheuring said.

It all depends on what's normal for a person, and whether things seem to be off kilter. "Somebody who's only sleeping a couple hours a night versus someone who's in bed all the time – both those things can be evidence the person is depressed," Scheuring said.

Other signs include feelings of sadness and hopelessness; agitation or anxiety; persistent, vague or unexplained physical complaints; social withdrawal; irritability or demanding behavior; difficulty concentrating; and fatigue. Depression that goes untreated can increase the risk of death from other illnesses or lead to suicide.

Getting help is a crucial step. After all, it's not easy dealing with age-related changes, and a little support can go a long way. "As people age the losses they have are extraordinary," Scheuring said. "They lose friends, sometimes other family members, spouses, the right to drive. Finances – will they have enough money to live a long time? All those are thoughts that go through folks' minds. It can be overwhelming."

Seniors can also become isolated more easily, especially this time of year. "Sometimes it's harder for them to get out," Scheuring said. "It depends on where they live. Snow and ice

scare them. Sometimes it's easier to stay in, and sometimes it's harder to get going again once you've been in for a while."

Since depression takes time to build, it can be nearly invisible to people who are afflicted. But loved ones often see it. If you know a senior who may be depressed, start by talking to them. Ask how they feel, and what you can do to help.

Don't hesitate to get the primary care physician involved. Simple changes to medication – including a review of drugs that may not work so well together – can help. The doctor can also make a referral to a mental health expert if necessary.

Another option is to call Senior Perspectives, the Nassawadox program run through Shore Psychiatric Services to help older people cope with loss, grief and other changes. Patients are treated during the day, Monday to Friday, as little or as often as necessary. They receive individual and group counseling, participate in activities and form a new network of support and friendship. "Most of the time we can help them to make changes, help them to cope in different ways," Scheuring said. "Sometimes medication helps. Sometimes taking away some medication helps."

The program has many success stories. One patient who used to spend all day in bed, curtains pulled tight, is now up early, dressed and ready to greet the morning. Others have returned after long absences to beloved activities such as church. "I think we've managed to keep people at a level of independence," Scheuring said, "or to help them feel better and regain some of the things they'd lost, interest in outside activities and other people."

Senior Perspectives can be contacted at 757-442-2053. Transportation is provided, and Medicare or private insurance often pays for the treatment.

Senior Perspectives and Shore Psychiatric Services are part of Shore Health Services, a local, nonprofit healthcare network that has been serving Accomack and Northampton counties since 1928. The Shore Health Services network also includes Shore Memorial Hospital, Shore Cancer Center and Shore LifeCare at Parksley, a long-term care home.

To learn more, call Senior Perspectives at 442-2053.

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*Shore Health Services is an integrated healthcare delivery organization that includes Shore Memorial Hospital, Shore LifeCare at Parksley, Shore Rehab, Shore Cardiopulmonary Wellness Services, Shore Healthcare at Home, Shore Cancer Center, School of Practical Nursing, Shore Medical Center at Metompkin, Lingle & Goldstein Surgical Associates, Shore Orthopedic Associates, Shore Psychiatric Services and Senior Perspectives.
For more information call Shore Health Services at 414-8051.*