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Depression Series: Why Don't I Respond to Medications? (Part 1)

By Michael G. Rayel, MD

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Maria has been feeling depressed for at least two and a half years. About three years ago, her husband of 20 years left her for another woman. Devastated, she became despondent and tearful almost daily.

Eventually, her depression got worse associated with inability to function. Her appetite, energy, concentration, and sleep became impaired. She also felt hopeless and suicidal. Her psychiatrist put her on a starting dose of antidepressant. She responded initially but after a few days, she felt just like before taking the medication.

For the past two years, Maria has tried four types of antidepressants. She has taken the usual adult doses of these drugs. Although she somewhat improves, she has virtually remained the same — depressed and disabled.

Maria seems to be taking the medications regularly. But why is she not responding to her antidepressants?

Maria is just one of the many depressed individuals who don't feel "normal" despite treatment. Depression is a treatable disease but how come some people don't do well on medications?

There are many reasons why depressed patients like Maria don't improve on antidepressants.

First, is the diagnosis correct?

Depression can be caused by many clinical entities. Sometimes, knowing the right diagnosis is a challenge. Medical disorders, medications such as beta-blockers and benzodiazepines (e.g. clonazepam), and various psychiatric disorders can cause depression and they all require different treatment. If your doctor fails to identify and treat the true cause of your depression, you will remain

depressed despite the use of antidepressant.

Second, are there co-morbid disorders?

Depression can exist along with other psychiatric disorders such as anxiety disorder, alcohol or drug problems, personality disorder, dementia, and psychosis. Depression will persist if these co-morbid disorders are not treated. For instance, depressive disorder with psychosis cannot be adequately treated just with antidepressant alone. You need an antipsychotic drug added to an antidepressant to treat the illness.

Third, is there an ongoing neurological or medical disorder that precipitates, aggravates, or complicates depression?

Hypothyroidism, hyperthyroidism, vitamin B-12 deficiency, pancreatic cancer, brain tumor, Parkinson's

disease, and stroke can all cause depression. If any of these disorders are present, antidepressants are less likely to help. The goal in these situations is to treat the underlying medical condition. A 65 year-old lady came to see me complaining of severe depression. On evaluation, she disclosed that she had been on three types of antidepressants for the past four years with minimal response. I checked her recent laboratory results which showed an abnormal thyroid! No wonder, she was not responding to the medication.

Fourth, are there ongoing psychosocial issues?

Financial problems, family conflict, work-related stress can all precipitate and complicate depression. Despite adequate medication treatment, some individuals will remain depressed especially if such problems are not addressed by the therapist or psychiatrist. Is there any way you can reduce the stressors? Please do so the earliest you can.

The treatment of depression is frequently straightforward. Occasionally however, various factors complicate it. For antidepressant to be effective, a psychiatrist should ensure that the diagnosis is correct, that co-morbid psychiatric disorders and medical problems are treated, and that psychosocial issues are adequately addressed.

Maria's doctor should explore further the real problem and provide the most appropriate intervention.

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. His books are available at major online bookstores.

Stress And Depression Are Connected

By Sylvia Jameson

Unlike their parents before them, baby boomers are well-known for their desire to "have it all." For the most part, they have succeeded in fulfilling that desire, but at what cost? In their pursuit for material wealth, striving for success and raising healthy and well-balanced children, stress has become a major factor in their life. As a result, many have been diagnosed with major depression.

More frequently than not, major depression often goes undiagnosed and thus untreated. Studies have shown that adults who committed suicide had visited their doctor just before taking their lives; twenty percent had seen their physician on the very same day; 40 percent within the same week; and 70 percent had seen their physician in the previous month.

Seek help from your primary care physician first. Be honest with your doctor. It is vital that your physician know the extent of your depression. Remember, you're not alone. Others suffer from debilitating depression as well. The social stigma once attached to mental illness is gone for the most part, particularly when it comes to depression. If the doctor asks if you have considered harming yourself or others, don't be afraid to admit that you have. Your honesty in this area is the first step towards treatment and can save your life.

Most physicians will recommend medication which will increase the brain's serotonin and norepinephrine. The medication will allow nerve cells in the brain to communicate with each other. There are numerous medications available to treat depression. One of the most common is Prozac. Prozac is said to have fewer side effects than many other medications. Although affective, some medications work better for some than for others. Keep in contact with your physician and let him know if the medication is helping or not. He will help you find the one that's most affective for you.

If suffering from major depression, medication may not be enough. Your physician will recommend psychotherapy as a means to learn the initial cause of your depression. Cramming one more thing into a baby boomer's busy life may cause them to cringe. So they might be tempted to rely solely on the medication. But the positive outcome of therapy should not be underestimated. More likely than not, a stressful lifestyle has caused your depression. The therapist can teach you how to relax, assist you in prioritizing, help you with breathing techniques and assist you in focusing on personal reasons behind your depression. Some patients have improved within six to eight weeks. It may take longer for those who have experienced some extreme trauma in their life.

Don't suffer in silence. You have choices. Recognize that you have a problem and seek help. Don't let depression prevent you from enjoying the lifestyle you've worked so hard to attain.

Sylvia Jameson is a staff writer at

and is an occasional contributor

to several other websites, including

.

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