

DEFEATING DEPRESSION *By Dory Martin, C.I.S.W., Tucson, AZ*

Depression is an illness that can result from our distorted view of a situation. After first learning of your kidney disease, you may have thought, “God is punishing me,” or, “Now I won’t be able to do any of the things I used to enjoy.” These thoughts create a distorted view of a situation. Another view may yield these thoughts: “This did not happen to me because I was bad” or “I may not be able to do everything as before, but maybe I will develop some new interests.”

Kidney disease forces you to take a look at yourself and the way you live in a new way. Making healthy lifestyle choices is something everyone should consider, but often do not do so until their health requires it.

Causes of Depression

As a kidney patient, you are faced with uncertainty that surrounds significant lifestyle changes. Will dialysis be necessary? Will it be permanent? Am I a candidate for a kidney transplant? When will the phone ring announcing the arrival of my new kidney? If I receive a transplant, will it be successful?

Some people’s first reaction is to refuse dialysis. When faced with the serious-sometimes fatal-consequences of refusing treatment, most accept it. For example, a friend of mine had zest for life before he became ill. After he was diagnosed with kidney disease, he suddenly didn’t care if he lived or died. His depression lifted as soon as dialysis treatments started.

Many of you are distraught over the idea of being “tied down” to a machine. The intrusion on your schedule causes some of you to feel that you lack control over your lives, which can lead to depression.

Renal disease has a bigger impact on eating and drinking than most other illnesses. While most people take good health for granted, you have probably become keenly aware of what a finely tuned and sensitive “machine” the body is, as more thought is given to every bite and sip. Renal disease can cause a lowered self-image. How you respond to renal disease depends upon your coping abilities, as well as family support and financial stability. Unfortunately, this adjustment can be difficult for those of you who can no longer work. So much of who we are is connected to what we do. Those people whose sense of identity is largely defined by their work will have a difficult time if their illness prevents them from being able to maintain previous work schedules. Self-esteem can suffer, not to mention financial well-being. This is a good time to re-examine priorities and values. Try to find a balance in the time you devote to family, friends, hobbies, yourself and your job, if you work.

If you are lucky enough to receive a new kidney, you may feel a sense of loss after being abruptly discharged from the dialysis center. The transplant team lends support, but to be disconnected suddenly from friends made at the center can be very stressful.

HOW TO COPE

Those of you who cope well probably have a strong support system, which can include family members, co-workers, spiritual leaders and counselors. If you do not have relatives, you can still develop and nurture close relationships through renal networks and support groups. If you are interested, contact your social worker.

Do not isolate yourself from others. Maintain contact with people who are and who are not related to your life with kidney disease. This will allow you to enjoy a well-rounded life and not become too focused on your condition. Stay physically active. Your mental health can only benefit if you stay physically fit. Your doctor can suggest appropriate activities for you. Keep a positive attitude. It is never too late to learn how to approach situations with optimism. While you are expected to feel the normal sadness that comes with a change in health, look for opportunities. Perhaps you will discover a talent you never knew you had. The power of laughter can help shape your positive attitude.

GETTING HELP: OPTIONS FOR TREATMENT

Perhaps by following these suggestions, you can prevent or treat symptoms of depression. If not, there are a number of alternatives to consider. Express yourself. Choose a trustworthy person who will listen. It can be a family member, friend, fellow renal patient, doctor, chaplain, social worker or mental health counselor. Some people consider it a weakness to seek counseling, but there is great value in being able to speak freely to a professional who is objective and can offer support and guidance. If this is too difficult, try writing a letter or poem; it can be extremely therapeutic.

Try holistic health practices. Yoga or meditation can help you achieve a relaxed state and a greater sense of well-being. These forms of natural medicine, in combination with conventional medicine can provide a comprehensive treatment plan.

Anti-depressant medications may be prescribed in conjunction with the above measures. Although there are people who find fault with taking pills to enhance one's mental state, few people would hesitate to take a blood pressure pill if they were diagnosed with hypertension. Realizing that there may be a chemical imbalance causing depression should ease the acceptance of taking an anti-depressant.

HOW FAMILIES RESPOND

Spouses must learn to cope when there is a diminished interest in sexual activity. It will be important for them to confront the issue and discover, if they have not already, the many ways to express affection, aside from sexual intercourse. People can derive much pleasure and comfort from hand-holding, kissing and hugging.

It is not uncommon for family members to feel signs of depression. In most communities, support groups for care givers are offered to help them cope with the stress that can accompany this role. It is comforting for these people in these circumstances to feel that they are not alone. They can offer support and reassurance.