

Dealing with Depression

By Eileen Ahearn, M.D.

Probably all of us have known someone suffering from depression. This condition is common. Approximately one in eight people may require treatment for depression during their lifetime, and in the United States, approximately 20 million people have depression in any given year. Depression occurs more often in women, with the age of onset often between 20 and 40 years old. There can be a genetic component to this illness, such that depression may be more common in some families than in others.

While the exact cause of depression is not known, there probably is some imbalance of brain chemicals called neurotransmitters. Depression is not caused by something a person has done and is certainly not a sign of weakness. It is a medical illness that is very treatable. Sometimes hormonal changes, changes in health, or severe or chronic stress may trigger a depressive episode. As parents or family members of a person with CdLS (Cornelia de Lange Syndrome), we are under more stress than the average family. We need to take good care of ourselves, and that includes being educated about treatable conditions, such as depression. The symptoms of depression include sadness, anxiety, worry, loss of energy, and an inability to concentrate. People often feel that they can't enjoy themselves and may be more withdrawn. They may experience a change in appetite (increased or decreased) and have difficulty with sleep (can't sleep or sleeping excessively). Sometimes people have feelings of guilt, irritability, and even thoughts of death.

If you experience any of the above symptoms lasting at least 2 weeks, it would be best to consult with your doctor. Your evaluation should include a physical exam, blood work, and a discussion about your feelings and symptoms. A medical professional, such as a primary care doctor or a psychiatrist, can help you to figure out if you do have depression and can help you find the appropriate treatment.

Treatments include both medication and psychotherapy. There are numerous antidepressants that are very effective and safe, the newer of which have few side effects. All antidepressants take about a month to take effect. Psychotherapy, or "talking therapy," can be used in conjunction with medication. Sometimes in mild depression, it is used as the primary treatment.

When a family member appears depressed, it is important to help and encourage them to see their doctor. You may want to go with the person to the initial appointment to provide information and support. Sometimes, people with depression do not have perspective on how they have changed. Emotional support and encouragement are critical to helping them through this difficult period.

In the case of families of people with CdLS, sometimes the demands of caretaking and stress of recurrent hospitalization of our children can lead to depression in family members. The high expectations we have for ourselves as parents can sometimes be too much, especially when added to the involved medical/emotional conditions of our children. Prevention is therefore important. Every effort should be made to get some respite services, summer





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camp services, and caretaking breaks. Most of our children should qualify for Medicaid insurance, which is not income based. Through Medicaid most children can obtain a personal care attendant or personal assistant who can come into the home to help. Contact your local Medicaid office to obtain information on how to apply. The overall health of children with CdLS is important. Equally critical is the health of the entire family. If you are getting enough support and help at home, you will be happier, more energized and better able to help your child with Cornelia de Lange Syndrome.

For further information about depression, contact the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance at 1-800-826-3632 or www.dbsalliance.org.

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