DEPRESSION AND THE ELDERLY

Depression can feel different for older people. They may feel tired or grumpy, have problems paying attention, be confused, or have mood changes. An elderly person with depression can also:

- Feel sad or anxious for a long time. (Feeling "down in the dumps" is not a normal part of aging.)
- Lose interest in everyday activities.
- Sleep too little or too much.
- Eat too much or too little.
- Have aches and pains that don't go away.
- Not be able to make decisions.
- Feel guilty, helpless, worthless, or hopeless.
- Think about death or suicide or even try to take their own life.

There is no single cause of depression. People can become depressed for no clear reason. An event, like being very sick or having a death in the family, can bring on depression. It's normal to feel sad in situations like these, but depression is more than just feeling sad. It lasts a long time, and causes other problems.

Growing older includes new and different challenges, such as:

- The financial limits of living on a "fixed income".
- Being alone or being away from loved ones.
- Changes in health or mobility that cause a loss of independence.
- Changes in vision so that you can't drive, read or write, sew, or enjoy other hobbies or activities.

The good news is that depression can be treated with medication and/or talk therapy. And there are ways to prevent depression.

- Prepare for the major changes that come with growing older, like retirement or moving.
- Stay in touch with family.
- Make an effort to keep friendships.
- Start a hobby to keep your body and mind active.
- Become physically active. Garden, dance, swim, or walk.

VA National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention
VHA Office of Patient Care Services
December 2008
www.prevention.va.gov