The Holiday Season: A Time to Assess Depression in Older Adults

The holiday season, which begins for most individuals with Thanksgiving and continues through New Year's Day, sometimes brings on feelings of stress and depression even among older adults. As many of us pack our bags and travel to see family, we should think about checking in to see how well our older relatives are doing in terms of their physical and mental health. With so many families being spread out across the country, the holidays may be the only time of year where we spend quality time with our relatives and are able to really see how each other is doing.

Late-life depression among older adults is more common than you may think, and in fact, is among the most common health problems experienced by older adults. Each year one out of five Iowans experiences a diagnosable mental illness, and depression is a serious medical disorder. It may worsen symptoms of other diseases and older people with depression are more likely to commit suicide than any other age group largely because they come to believe depression is an inevitable part of aging and there is nothing that can be done.

The good news is that depression is treatable, especially among older adults. It is not something to be ashamed of. So, if you think an older relative may be feeling more blue than usual this holiday season, encourage them to see their doctor. Let them know that depression, like diabetes, is not a normal part of getting older. Depression, like diabetes, is more common than you may think, and depression, like diabetes, can be managed with proper care.

In an effort to address the growing need of mental health services to older Iowans, the Iowa Coalition on Mental Health and Aging (ICHMA) was formed in 2005 to promote mental health for older Iowans so that they can live, learn, recreate, engage in meaningful activities and access appropriate services in the communities of their choice. You can access more information about mental health needs among older adults and learn about what you can do to help at the ICHMA at: http://www.public-health.uiowa.edu/icmha/. You can also call the Center on Aging at the University of Iowa at (319) 384-4566.