

Depression and Anxiety in AMD Patients

About one in three visually impaired seniors shows symptoms of depression. That is double the rate of depression for seniors with normal vision.

Over a lifetime, adults develop problem solving techniques to cope with life's troubles. However, vision loss is a difficulty most have not developed skills to address, so it is not unexpected that seniors living with AMD might exhibit symptoms of depression. As the baby boomers age, and AMD becomes more prevalent, it will become increasingly important to address the related mental health issues.

In a review article published last year¹, the authors looked at links between depression and AMD. Here are three key findings:

- Patients diagnosed with both wet and dry versions of AMD were **equally likely to suffer from anxiety** and depression as their conditions progressed.

- When vision falls below **patient expectations**, there is increased risk for depression. Patients who had sub-optimal outcomes were less likely to be depressed than those who had a better result if their expectations were inflated. Anxiety is not tied to how good your vision is, but how good you think it should be. Managing expectations is important in avoiding AMD-related anxiety.
- There is a strong relationship between **functional capacity and depression**. The authors described a cycle where patients experience distress as a result of vision loss and that leads to limiting or ending valued activities. When these activities stop, motivation decreases and depression increases. As an example, the avid tennis player finds that AMD makes playing difficult and gives up the game. The resulting loss of social interaction and reduction in physical exercise results in decreased well-being, which leads to limiting participation in more activities.

Problem solving techniques help individuals manage the limitations brought on by vision loss, and can alleviate some of the resulting anxiety, but they are not cures for depression.

The authors found two techniques are especially useful:

- **Low vision rehabilitation** is a useful tool that is undervalued by some. By receiving training in the use of orientation and mobility skills, and the use of optical and assistive devices, independence can be maintained for a longer period.
- As AMD progresses, individuals need to adjust their goals to match the situation. The authors use the example of an individual who loves to read. Early in the disease process, a magnifier can help, but at some point, it may be more useful to refocus energy on a **realistic rather than unattainable goal** – listening to books on tape will avoid some of the challenges and may provide the satisfaction of the written word.

Depression is a common and understandable reaction to vision loss. Your eye doctor, together with your primary care physician, can recommend medication, counseling and/or low vision rehabilitation to reduce symptoms of depression and frustration.

1. Cimarolli VR, Casten RJ, *et al*, Anxiety and depression in patients with advanced macular degeneration: current perspectives, *Clinical Ophthalmology* 10:55-63, 2016.