This spring and summer, a research team from the University of Kentucky Department of Behavioral Science and the Center for Excellence in Rural Health (Hazard) talked to 28 different women across southeast Kentucky about their experiences with depression. Here are a few of the highlights of what we learned:

What Depression Feels Like

Women had really different experiences with what their depression feels like. For some, women felt miserable but were sure that no one else in their lives had any idea what they were going through. For others, it made them want to sit in bed all day long, made them feel worried all of the time, angry at everything, or just really lonely. These feelings come and go for some women, and for others, these feelings are there all of the time.

What are some of the causes of depression for women in southeast Kentucky?

Some women have struggled with depression their entire lives, and could remember their parents also struggling with depression from the time they were young. Many women experienced loss of family members and loved ones that began their depression. Some women experienced one loss after another, so the initial depression just settled into place—like one woman said, “I don’t think it’s ever went away.” For other women, their depression has been caused by specific events in their lives—divorce, severe illness, conflicts with family members. Many women spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to resolve these events and felt troubled by their feelings. For some women, violent or abusive relationships played a role in their depression, making them feel rejected, unloved, and betrayed. Lots of women said that the difficult economy in the area caused their depression. They felt stuck in jobs that were not rewarding, did not pay them well, and offered few chances to advance—and that all of this created a lot of frustration. For others, the difficulty of making ends meet every month was really stressful and made them worry constantly. Finally, numerous women explained how challenging it was to take care of their families—including older parents, children, family members with depression, and family members they could not count on. For many, trying to keep the family together and happy was very important, but also could be a burden that made them feel hopeless.

How does it affect your life?

Nearly every woman we talked to mentioned how hard she tried to make sure that her family, friends, and community would not find out about her feelings. But often, this was very difficult because of how strong women’s feelings were and how much it affected their lives. One woman explained, “Everybody around me noticed it because...I was just like in a daze and it was like they would talk to me and then I would be like, oh what, you know what did you say, I wasn’t listening.” Other women said that they made an effort to make sure that if they were upset, they made sure their children could not see them cry, or they would try their best to try to spend time by themselves on the porch or in the car whenever they could so they did not have to explain their feelings.

Many women mentioned that depression makes it difficult to eat the way they feel they should. Yet for a lot of other women, the cost of food—rather than depression itself—was the reason it was hard to eat right. Other women explained that they knew that being more physically active could help them, but it was hard to find the motivation, both because of their feelings and because of how tiring it was to look after their families and work. Still, for others, they felt frustrated because there were no opportunities for exercising in a rural area.

Do you have support for your depression?

Most women said they struggled to find support to deal with their depression. Family and friends might want to help, but often they did not know how or did not have much patience. For instance, one woman said, “I feel like I'm always leaning on everybody but nobody's not listening to me you know and it hurts real bad.” Many women just did not feel comfortable sharing their feelings with anyone else, but other people didn’t understand that. It was just easier to be alone than to reach out. As one woman put it, “I do like to just go off and be by myself with nobody around and they don’t understand that you know. [They ask,] ‘Why do you want to be by yourself?’”

But a number of women explained that part of the reason they did not want to share their feelings was because they felt like other people would judge them. “I think,” one woman explained, that “people are afraid of what other
people will think if they do [say what they feel] or see them as weak in that matter.” With depression especially, many friends and family members could misunderstand what these feelings meant. One woman explained that she and others didn’t share their feelings because “There is that stigma attached to it; people are ashamed to say it; they’re ashamed to say that they’re depressed over something or they’re sad over something because everybody looks at them like something’s wrong.”

**Have you gotten help for depression? Why or why not?**

About half of the women we talked to received some kind of treatment for depression and about half did not receive any treatment—whether medication or therapy. For those who did not receive any help, many felt that it couldn’t make a difference. One woman said, “Everybody told me if I went and talked to a counselor, maybe I’d feel better just to let it out. Well that person can’t help me; they can’t change anything that’s going on at home.” Many women feared the effects of depression medication, particularly in an area where drug abuse can be common. One woman explained that she would not take medication because, “A lot of them that end up on pills for depression end up on worse pills and then they’re, the next thing you know they’re robbing stores.”

The women who had received treatment of some kind had mixed experiences. One woman who received therapy explained that, “I just feel like it’s a place to go and you sit there for an hour and you tell a perfect stranger or even a person you know fairly well your problems and I don’t know, I’m not throwing off on it; I just think it’s a joke.” But a few women had really positive experiences with therapy and felt that it helped them to understand their feelings and work through the difficult situations they were faced with. Others felt that therapists or doctors could make them feel better and would not judge them for their feelings: “They’re not going to tell you what you should or should not do when you go home but they’re just there to listen to you.” Many women were on some kind of antidepressant medication and felt that it made some kind of difference in their feelings, even though many wished the medication made more of a difference.

A number of people explained that it was difficult to get quality help for depression in this area. One woman explained that there were options for church-based therapy or religious therapy, but “there’s nowhere else to look around here unless you go to like Lexington and it’s hard to make a 2 hour drive in the middle of the day!” Some people said it was frustrating that many of the local options for depression treatment were designed for people who also abused drugs. It felt strange to seek treatment in this kind of place, one woman stated, because: “I don’t want to be up here with a bunch of people snorting pills every day.”

**What are we doing with what we learned?**

First, it is clear that there need to be more options for depression treatment in eastern Kentucky. Many people wanted some kind of help, but it was just hard to get that help because of time, money, effort, and the exhaustion of how they felt. Because of this, we learned that depression treatment needs to fit women’s busy and challenging lives. We have started talking with community health workers and doctors based in Hazard to plan how we could make it easier to get treatment and also to get better quality treatment. Because a number of women said that they felt judged for their feelings and isolated, it’s important to make sure that women do not feel ashamed for being depressed.

Second, we are writing articles from this research so that we can share this information with other people who want to learn about women’s depression and depression in Eastern Kentucky. We have been glad that a number of people have been interested in what we have learned:

- **University of Kentucky News:** [http://uknow.uky.edu/content/research-investigates-another-kentucky-ugly-mental-health-disparities](http://uknow.uky.edu/content/research-investigates-another-kentucky-ugly-mental-health-disparities)
- **Health Matters**, radio show on WMKY 90.3 Morehead: [http://wmky.org/post/claire-snell-rood-show](http://wmky.org/post/claire-snell-rood-show)

We will continue to post whatever articles and media stories that come out of this research on the Center for Excellence in Rural Health website, [http://ruralhealth.med.uky.edu/](http://ruralhealth.med.uky.edu/). If you have any questions or comments, feel free to contact us at [snell-rood@uky.edu](mailto:snell-rood@uky.edu) or at (859) 257-4547.