

Supporting Someone With Depression

Depression is a mental health condition that affects the way a person feels, thinks, and handles daily activities such as eating, sleeping, and working. When a person has depression, his or her condition can affect others around him or her, such as friends and family members. Friends and family can help by offering support and understanding.

What do I need to know about this condition?

The main symptoms of depression are:

- Constant depressed or irritable mood.
- Loss of interest in things and activities that were enjoyed in the past.

Other symptoms of depression include:

- Fatigue.
- Sleeping too much or too little.
- Difficulty falling asleep, or waking up early and not being able to get back to sleep.
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions.
- Changes in appetite and weight.
- Staying away from others (*isolating* oneself).
- Expressing feelings of guilt.
- Expressing suicidal thoughts or feelings.

What do I need to know about the treatment options?

This condition is usually treated by mental health providers such as psychologists, psychiatrists, and clinical social workers. Treatment may include one or more of the following:

- Psychotherapy, also called talk therapy or counseling. Types of psychotherapy include individual or group therapy, and they usually involve the following approaches:
 - Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). This type of therapy teaches a person how to recognize feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that contribute to depression. The person is taught to make a choice about how to respond to these feelings, thoughts, and behaviors so that he or she can experience fewer symptoms.
 - Interpersonal therapy (IPT). This helps to improve the way that someone with depression relates to and communicates with others. This type of therapy may involve caregivers and loved ones.
 - Family therapy. This treatment helps family members to communicate and deal with conflict in healthy ways.
- Medicine. This is often used to help with certain emotions and behaviors.



Combining medicine and therapy is often the most effective approach. The following lifestyle changes may also help with managing symptoms of depression:

- Limiting alcohol and drug use.
- Exercising regularly.
- Getting enough good-quality sleep.

- Making healthy eating choices.
- Reducing distressing situations.
- Spending time outside.
- Following regular daily routines.

How can I support my loved one?

Talk about the condition

Good communication is the key to supporting your friend or family member. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Ask your loved one how you can support him or her.
- Respect your loved one's right to make decisions.
- Be careful about too much prodding. Try not to overdo reminders to an adult friend or family member about things like taking medicines. Ask how your loved one prefers that you help.
- Be encouraging and offer emotional support. This can help to lower stress. Even saying something simple to comfort your loved one may help.
- **Never** ignore comments about suicide, and **do not** try to avoid the subject of suicide. Talking about suicide will not make your loved one want to act on it. You or your loved one can reach out 24 hours a day to get free, private support (on the phone or a live online chat) from a suicide crisis helpline, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.
- Listening is very important. Be available if your friend or family member wants to talk. Make an effort to acknowledge his or her feelings and stay calm and realistic.

Find support and resources

A health care provider may be able to recommend mental health resources that are available online or over the phone. You could start with:

- Government sites such as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): www.samhsa.gov
- National mental health organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI): www.nami.org

You may also consider:

- Joining self-help and support groups, not only for your friend or family member, but also for yourself. People in these peer and family support groups understand what you and your loved one are going through. They can help you feel a sense of hope and connect you with local resources to help you learn more.
- Attending family therapy with your loved one.

General support

- Make an effort to learn all you can about depression.
- Help your loved one follow his or her treatment plan as directed by health care providers. This could mean driving him or her to therapy sessions or suggesting ways to cope with stress.
- Ask your loved one if you may join him or her for a therapy session or go with him or her to health care visits. Joining your loved one with his or her permission can give you an opportunity to learn how to be more supportive.
- Include your loved one in activities. Invite her or him to go for walks and outings. At first, your loved one may not want to, but keep trying.
- Be patient and **do not** expect your loved one to do too much too soon.

- Help with daily responsibilities, such as laundry or meals. Sometimes daily tasks seem overwhelming to a person with depression.
- Remember that your support really matters. Social support is a huge benefit for someone who is coping with depression.

How can I create a safe environment?

If your loved one feels unable to control his or her behavior, it may be necessary to take steps to keep his or her home safe. Such steps may include:

- Locking up alcohol and prescription pills that your loved one may turn to. Count prescription pills often. You may want to consider removing alcohol from the home.
- Removing or locking up guns and other weapons. If you do not have a safe place to keep a gun, local law enforcement may store a gun for you.
- Making a written crisis plan. Include important phone numbers, such as the local crisis intervention team. Make sure that:
 - The person with depression knows about this plan.
 - Everyone who has regular contact with that person knows about the plan and knows what to do in an emergency.

How should I care for myself?

It is important to find ways to care for your body, mind, and well-being while supporting someone with depression.

- Spend time with friends and family. Find someone you can talk to who will also help you work on using coping skills to manage stress. Consider seeking therapy for yourself.
- Try to maintain your normal routines. This can help you remember that your life is about more than your loved one's condition.
- Understand what your limits are. Say "no" to requests or events that lead to a schedule that is too busy.
- Make time for activities that help you relax, and try to not feel guilty about taking time for yourself.
- Consider trying meditation and deep breathing exercises to lower stress.
- Get plenty of sleep.
- Exercise, even if it is just taking a short walk a few times a week.



What are some signs that the condition is getting worse?

Signs that your loved one's condition may be getting worse include:

- Symptoms returning or getting worse.
- Not taking medicines or attending therapy as prescribed.
- Having more trouble sleeping or doing everyday activities.
- Withdrawal from friends and family.

Get help right away if:

- Your loved one expresses serious thoughts about self-harm or about hurting others.
- Your loved one sees, hears, tastes, smells, or feels things that are not present (*hallucinations*).

If you ever feel like your loved one may hurt himself or herself or others, or may have thoughts about taking his or her own life, get help right away. You can go to your nearest emergency department or call:

- **Your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.).**
- **A suicide crisis helpline, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. This is open 24 hours a day.**

Summary

- Depression is a mood disorder that affects the way a person feels, thinks, and handles daily activities.
- Depression is usually treated by mental health professionals. It may include psychotherapy, medicine, lifestyle changes, or a combination of these approaches.
- When you support a loved one with depression, it is important to keep yourself healthy and safe.
- Get help right away if your loved one expresses serious thoughts about self-harm.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

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