

GIVING SUPPORT

Helping someone who has depression

You may have a friend, family member, or other loved one with depression. Depression is not just a case of the blues that goes away after a few days. Just like diabetes or high blood pressure, it is a serious medical condition that usually needs to be treated. For many people with depression, it can be difficult to get through the day. But support from loved ones can help them get better.



What is a support partner?

If your loved one has depression, he or she might avoid family and friends. This could make you think that your loved one doesn't want your help. But friends, family, and other loved ones play an important role in helping a person with depression get better. These loved ones are called *support partners*. As a support partner, you can help in many ways. For example, you can:

- Go with loved ones to appointments with their health care providers
- Help them get involved again in activities they used to enjoy
- Remind them that sticking to their care plan can help them feel better

It can be helpful to try to find out as much as you can about depression. The more you know, the easier it will be for you to help your loved one get better.

Recognizing signs of depression

If your loved one has depression, you might have noticed some changes recently. Some people with depression might seem unhappy for no reason. For others, it can be very clear that something isn't right. That's because people experience depression in different ways, with different symptoms. Some of the most common symptoms of depression are listed in the table to the right.



Common symptoms of depression

Emotional	Mental	Physical
• Feeling sad or hopeless • Losing interest in things that used to be enjoyable • Feeling worthless or guilty • Often thinking about death, dying, or suicide	• Having trouble concentrating or remembering things • Having trouble making decisions	• Eating much more or much less than usual • Sleeping much more or much less than usual • Feeling agitated or restless (for example, having trouble sitting still) • Feeling tired or lacking energy

When symptoms return

Sometimes, even after someone with depression has felt better for a while, symptoms can come back or get worse. If you notice this, talk with your loved one. You may also want to know the things that make your loved one's depression worse (called *triggers*). Triggers might include stress at work or problems with money.

Keeping your loved one safe

If your loved one mentions suicide, do not ignore the comment. Contact his or her health care provider. If you think your loved one might harm himself or herself, do one of these things right away:

- Call 911
- Take your loved one to the emergency room
- Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255) to talk with a trained counselor (available 24 hours a day)

The goal of treatment

It's important for people with depression to talk openly with their health care providers. They should discuss how they're feeling now and how they expect to feel during treatment. Different people may have different goals. Generally, treatment is successful when depression stops getting in the way of daily life. As a support partner, you can help your loved one reach that goal.



Helping a loved one stay on treatment

One role you may have as a support partner is to help make sure your loved one gets the treatment he or she needs. You can do that by encouraging your loved one to stick to his or her care plan. A care plan usually includes:

- Visits with a health care provider
- Taking medicine correctly

People with depression may want to stop taking their medicine if:

- **They are having side effects.** Some side effects may start to go away as the body gets used to the new medicine
- **They are starting to feel better.** That can mean that the medicine is working. Remind your loved one to keep taking the medicine
- **They think the medicine isn't working.** Some medicines for depression may take as long as 8 weeks before they work their best so that your health care provider can assess whether they are working for you

Stopping a medicine too soon can make depression worse. It can also cause side effects. Encourage your loved one to talk with his or her health care provider about any issues with medicine. The health care provider may change the amount of medicine. Or the health care provider might switch to a different medicine or add an extra medicine instead.

Types of support

As a support partner, you can give your loved one 2 main types of support:

- **Emotional support**—encouragement and understanding
- **Practical support**—help with daily tasks

Your loved one might not be eager to talk about depression with you right away. But even if he or she isn't ready to talk, you can still be helpful in the meantime. Just letting your loved one know you're concerned can help.



How I can offer support

The table below has examples of support that you can give your loved one. Talk with your loved one about what he or she would like help with. Put a check in the box next to each way you can help. Then write when or how often you will help in that way. There are blank spaces at the bottom of the table for your own ideas.

Emotional Support		How Often	Practical Support		How Often
Call to see how he/she is doing	☒	Example: <i>Every morning</i>	Help him/her make appointments with a health care provider	☒	Example: <i>This Tuesday</i>
Text to see how he/she is doing	☐		Help with medical paperwork	☐	
Help him/her be more active	☐		Make a meal for him/her	☐	
Go to a support group meeting together	☐		Remind him/her to take medicine	☐	
Tell him/her if signs of depression get worse	☐	<i>Ongoing</i>	Take him/her to health care provider appointments	☐	
Encourage him/her to stick to the care plan	☐	<i>Ongoing</i>	Run errands for him/her	☐	
Point out when he/she is making progress	☐	<i>Ongoing</i>	Do something fun together	☐	
_____	☐		_____	☐	
_____	☐		_____	☐	
_____	☐		_____	☐	



Noting progress

People with depression might not notice the small changes each day that may show they're getting better. That's why it's important to point out any small steps your loved one makes. Here are some encouraging words you can share:

- *"It's good to see you smiling"*
- *"I'm happy to hear you're getting back into your hobbies"*

Offering encouragement

Remember that people experience depression in different ways. Their symptoms might vary, and it can take a long time to get better. It may be frustrating for both of you when progress seems slow. This can increase your loved one's feelings of hopelessness. To help give him or her hope, you may try saying things like:

- *"I'm here for you, and you're not alone"*
- *"It might be hard to believe right now, but you won't always feel this way"*
- *"I might not always understand exactly how you feel, but I care about you"*
- *"I'm here to help you. We'll get through this together"*

As your loved one makes progress, his or her needs may change. The best way to find out what your loved one needs is to ask direct, specific questions. Continue to offer support along the journey to recovery.





Taking care of yourself

People who help care for a loved one with depression may experience many emotions. As a support partner, you might take your loved one's behavior personally. You may also feel rejected when he or she does not accept your help. This can make you feel angry, frustrated, and alone. It can even put you at risk for depression.

That's why it's important to take care of yourself, too. Here are some things you can try:

Take a break from your loved one with depression. Do things you enjoy with other special people in your life.



Join a support group for caregivers. You can learn helpful tips for coping, and it can remind you that you're not alone.



Do things to make you healthier, such as eating right and being active.



Consider talking with a counselor to help you understand and deal with your own emotions.



Remember—most people with depression do get better with treatment. As a support partner, you have an important role in your loved one's recovery.

For more information about depression and how you can help, visit or call:

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance: www.dbsalliance.org or 1-800-826-3632

Families for Depression Awareness: www.familyaware.org or 1-781-890-0220