

Helping Someone with Depression

Taking Care of Yourself While Supporting a Depressed Loved One

[Español \(/es/articulos/depresion/ayudando-a-alguien-con-depresion.htm\)](/es/articulos/depresion/ayudando-a-alguien-con-depresion.htm)



When a spouse, family member, or friend suffers from depression, your support and encouragement can play an important role in their recovery. You can help them to cope with depression's symptoms, overcome negative thoughts, and regain their energy, optimism, and enjoyment of life. However, your loved one's depression can also wear you down if you neglect your own needs. These guidelines can help you support a depressed person in their recovery while maintaining your own emotional equilibrium.

How to help someone with depression

Depression is a serious but treatable disorder that affects millions of people, from young to old and from all walks of life. It gets in the way of everyday life, causing tremendous pain, hurting not just those suffering from it, but also impacting everyone around them.

If someone you love is depressed, you may be experiencing any number of difficult emotions, including helplessness, frustration, anger, fear, guilt, and sadness. *These feelings are all normal.* It's not easy dealing with a friend or family member's depression. And if you don't take care of yourself, it can become overwhelming.

That said, there are steps you can take to help your loved one. Start by learning about depression and how to talk about it with your friend or family member. But as you reach out, don't forget to look after your own emotional health. Thinking about your own needs is not an act of selfishness—it's a necessity. Your emotional strength will allow you to provide the ongoing support your depressed friend or family member needs.

Understanding depression in a friend or family member

Depression is a serious condition. Don't underestimate the seriousness of depression. Depression drains a person's energy, optimism, and motivation. Your depressed loved one can't just "snap out of it" by sheer force of will.

The symptoms of depression aren't personal. Depression makes it difficult for a person to connect on a deep emotional level with anyone, even the people he or she loves most. In addition, depressed people often say hurtful things and lash out in anger. Remember that this is the depression talking, not your loved one, so try not to take it personally.

Hiding the problem won't make it go away. Don't be an enabler. It doesn't help anyone involved if you are making excuses, covering up the problem, or lying for a friend or family member who is depressed. In fact, this may keep the depressed person from seeking treatment.

You can't "fix" someone else's depression. Don't try to rescue your loved one from depression. It's not up to you to fix the problem, nor can you. You're not to blame for your loved one's depression or responsible for their happiness (or lack thereof). Ultimately, recovery is in the hands of the depressed person.

Is my friend or loved one depressed?

Family and friends are often the first line of defense in the fight against depression. That's why it's important to understand the [signs and symptoms of depression](/articles/depression/depression-symptoms-and-warning-signs.htm) (/articles/depression/depression-symptoms-and-warning-signs.htm). You may notice the problem in a depressed loved one before they do, and your influence and concern can motivate them to seek help.

Be concerned if your loved one...

Doesn't seem to care about anything anymore. Has lost interest in work, sex, hobbies, and other pleasurable activities. Has withdrawn from friends, family, and other social activities.

Expresses a bleak or negative outlook on life. Is uncharacteristically sad, irritable, short-tempered, critical, or moody; talks about feeling “helpless” or “hopeless.”

Frequently complains of aches and pains such as headaches, stomach problems, and back pain. Or complains of feeling tired and drained all the time.

Sleeps less than usual or oversleeps. Has become indecisive, forgetful, disorganized, and “out of it.”

Eats more or less than usual, and has recently gained or lost weight.

Drinks more or abuses drugs, including prescription sleeping pills and painkillers.

The risk of suicide is real

What to do in a crisis situation

If you believe your loved one is at an immediate risk for suicide, do NOT leave the person alone.

In the U.S., dial 911 or call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/) (http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/) at 1-800-273-TALK.

In other countries, call your country’s emergency services number or visit [IASP](http://www.iasp.info/resources/Crisis_Centres) (http://www.iasp.info/resources/Crisis_Centres) to find a suicide prevention helpline.

It may be hard to believe that the person you know and love would ever consider something as drastic as suicide, but a depressed person may not see any other way out. Depression clouds judgment and distorts thinking, causing a normally rational person to believe that death is the only way to end the pain he or she is feeling.

Suicide Warning Signs

When someone is depressed, suicide is a very real danger. It’s important to know the warning signs:

- ▶ Talking about suicide, dying, or harming oneself; a preoccupation with death
- ▶ Expressing feelings of hopelessness or self-hate
- ▶ Acting in dangerous or self-destructive ways
- ▶ Getting affairs in order and saying goodbye
- ▶ Seeking out pills, weapons, or other lethal objects

▶ Sudden sense of calm after a depression

If you think a friend or family member might be considering suicide, talk to them about your concerns as soon as possible. Many people feel uncomfortable bringing up the topic but it is one of the best things you can do for someone who is thinking about suicide. Talking openly about suicidal thoughts and feelings can save a person's life, so speak up if you're concerned and seek professional help immediately!

How to talk to someone about depression

Sometimes it is hard to know what to say when speaking to a loved one about depression. You might fear that if you bring up your worries they will get angry, feel insulted, or ignore your concerns. You may be unsure what questions to ask or how to be supportive.

If you don't know where to start, the following suggestions may help. **But remember that being a compassionate listener is much more important than giving advice.** You don't have to try to "fix" the person; you just have to be a good listener. Often, the simple act of talking to someone face to face can be an enormous help to someone suffering from depression. Encourage the depressed person to talk about their feelings, and be willing to listen without judgment.

Don't expect a single conversation to be the end of it. Depressed people tend to withdraw from others and isolate themselves. You may need to express your concern and willingness to listen over and over again. Be gentle, yet persistent.

Ways to start the conversation:

"I have been feeling concerned about you lately."

"Recently, I have noticed some differences in you and wondered how you are doing."

"I wanted to check in with you because you have seemed pretty down lately."

Questions you can ask:

"When did you begin feeling like this?"

"Did something happen that made you start feeling this way?"

"How can I best support you right now?"

"Have you thought about getting help?"

Remember, being supportive involves offering encouragement and hope. Very often, this is a matter of talking to the person in language that they will understand and respond to while in a depressed mind frame.

What you CAN say that helps:

You are not alone in this. I'm here for you.

You may not believe it now, but the way you're feeling will change.

I may not be able to understand exactly how you feel, but I care about you and want to help.

When you want to give up, tell yourself you will hold on for just one more day, hour, minute—whatever you can manage.

You are important to me. Your life is important to me.

Tell me what I can do now to help you.

What you should AVOID saying:

It's all in your head.

We all go through times like this.

Look on the bright side.

You have so much to live for, why do you want to die?

I can't do anything about your situation.

Just snap out of it.

What's wrong with you?

Shouldn't you be better by now?

Source: *The Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance*

Encouraging your loved one to get help

While you can't control someone else's recovery from depression, you can start by encouraging the depressed person to seek help. Getting a depressed person into treatment can be difficult. Depression saps energy and motivation, so even the act of making an appointment or finding a doctor can seem daunting. Depression also involves negative ways of thinking. The depressed person may believe that the situation is hopeless and treatment pointless.

Because of these obstacles, getting your loved one to admit to the problem—and helping them see that it can be solved—is an essential step in depression recovery.

If your loved one resists getting help:

Suggest a general check-up with a physician. Your loved one may be less anxious about seeing a family doctor than a mental health professional. A regular doctor's visit is actually a great option, since the doctor can rule out medical causes of depression. If the doctor diagnoses depression, he or she can refer your loved one to a psychiatrist or psychologist. Sometimes, this "professional" opinion makes all the difference.

Offer to help your depressed loved one find a doctor or therapist and go with them on the first visit. [Finding the right treatment provider](/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm) (/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm) can be difficult, and is often a trial-and-error process. For a depressed person already low on energy, it is a huge help to have assistance making calls and looking into the options.

Encourage the person to make a thorough list of symptoms and ailments to discuss with the doctor. You can even bring up things that you have noticed as an outside observer, such as, "You seem to feel much worse in the mornings," or "You always get stomach pains before work."

Beating depression, one day at a time

You can't beat depression through sheer willpower, but you do have some control—even if your depression is severe and stubbornly persistent. The key to depression recovery is to start with a few small goals and slowly build from there. Feeling better takes time, but you can get there if you make positive choices for yourself each day and draw on the support of others.

Supporting your loved one's treatment

One of the most important things you can do to help a friend or relative with depression is to give your unconditional love and support throughout the treatment process. This involves being compassionate and patient, which is not always easy when dealing with the negativity, hostility, and moodiness that go hand in hand with depression.

Provide whatever assistance the person needs (and is willing to accept). Help your loved one make and keep appointments, research treatment options, and stay on schedule with any treatment prescribed.

Have realistic expectations. It can be frustrating to watch a depressed friend or family member struggle, especially if progress is slow or stalled. Having patience is important. Even with optimal treatment, recovery from depression doesn't happen overnight.

Lead by example. Encourage your friend or family member to lead a healthier, mood-boosting lifestyle by doing it yourself: maintain a positive outlook, eat better, avoid alcohol and drugs, exercise, and lean on others for support.

Encourage activity. Invite your loved one to join you in uplifting activities, like going to a funny movie or having dinner at a favorite restaurant. [Exercise is especially helpful](/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm), so try to get your depressed loved one moving. Going on walks together is one of the easiest options. Be gently and lovingly persistent—don't get discouraged or stop asking.

Pitch in when possible. Seemingly small tasks can be hard for a depressed person to manage. Offer to help out with household responsibilities or chores, but only do what you can without getting [burned out](/articles/stress/burnout-prevention-and-recovery.htm) (/articles/stress/burnout-prevention-and-recovery.htm) yourself!

Taking care of yourself

There's a natural impulse to want to fix the problems of people we love, but you can't control a loved one's depression. You can, however, control how well you take care of yourself. It's just as important for you to stay healthy as it is for the depressed person to get treatment, so make your own well-being a priority.

Remember the advice of airline flight attendants: put on your own oxygen mask before you assist anyone else. In other words, make sure your own health and happiness are solid before you try to help someone who is depressed. You won't do your friend or family member any good if you collapse under the pressure of trying to help. When your own needs are taken care of, you'll have the energy you need to lend a helping hand.

Tips for taking care of yourself

Think of this challenging time like a marathon; you need extra sustenance to keep yourself going. The following ideas will help you keep your strength up as you support your loved one through depression treatment and recovery.

Speak up for yourself. You may be hesitant to speak out when the depressed person in your life upsets you or lets you down. However, honest communication will actually help the relationship in the long run. If you're suffering in silence and letting resentment build, your loved one will pick up on these negative emotions and feel even worse. Gently talk about how you're feeling before pent-up emotions make it too hard to communicate with sensitivity.

Set boundaries. Of course you want to help, but you can only do so much. Your own health will suffer if you let your life be controlled by your loved one's depression. You can't be a [caretaker round the clock](/articles/stress/caregiver-stress-and-burnout.htm) without paying a psychological price. To avoid burnout and resentment, set clear limits on what you are willing and able to do. You are not your loved one's therapist, so don't take on that responsibility.

Stay on track with your own life. While some changes in your daily routine may be unavoidable while caring for your friend or relative, do your best to keep appointments and plans with friends. If your depressed loved one is unable to go on an outing or trip you had planned, ask a friend to join you instead.

Seek support. You are NOT betraying your depressed relative or friend by turning to others for support. Joining a support group, talking to a counselor or clergyman, or confiding in a trusted friend will help you get through this tough time. You don't need to go into detail about your loved one's depression or betray confidences; instead focus on your emotions and what you are feeling. Make sure you can be totally honest with the person you turn to—choose someone who will listen without interruption and without judging you.

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