# Explaining Depression to Family and Friends

by ERIC PATTERSON

## How to Explain Depression to Loved Ones

Depression has been a part of your life for so long now; it's hard to remember what you are like without it. Depression made its presence known by removing your motivation, reducing your mood and changing you from someone full of hope and optimism into a pessimist. The way you view yourself and the world around you is skewed.

To make matters worse, some of the people in your life are viewing you differently. Rather than understanding, they portray your issues as a character flaw or personal shortcoming. They have said that you are being lazy and unmotivated.

Part of managing your depression is maintaining positive, beneficial supports. If the people in your life have been critical or lacking in understanding, give them an education on depression — maybe you can turn an enemy into an ally.

### Know Your Symptoms

Before you can explain depression to anyone else, you must understand it yourself. When did it first present? What are your triggers? What intensity of symptoms do you experience? What is helpful for you when symptoms are high?

Having a grasp of your patterns and building a familiarity of yourself makes you a better communicator to friends, family and professionals in your life.

Do not just guess when you answer these questions; take a serious look over the last weeks and months to gather background information. Additionally, observe your recent behavior over a two-week period to track your symptoms. This activity may provide new information you never considered.

### Know Depression

If you are in therapy or receive medication, ask your healthcare professional for information about depression.

Depression is not one-size-fits-all — there are different types of depressive disorders, including major depressive disorder, premenstrual dysphoric disorder, persistent depressive disorder, disruptive mood dysregulation disorder, and others.

Each of these diagnoses has qualifiers to better individualize the diagnosis. Knowing your diagnosis helps you understand specifics or your disorder.

### Know the Criteria

Mental health professionals use a text called the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) to diagnose mental health issues. Each diagnosis has a detailed list of self-reported symptoms that must be met to qualify for the diagnosis.

Professionals will use tools, questionnaires and rating scales to better understand your symptoms to judge if you meet criteria. Stay away from online polls or surveys about your symptoms to determine your diagnosis — these are unreliable and will only yield inaccuracies and confusion.

Did you know you do not have to feel depressed to have depression? Many people with a depression diagnosis experience mood symptoms that are more irritable or anger than depressed and sad.

Did you know depression can trigger an unwanted impact on your attention and concentration? Many people mistakenly think they have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) when it is actually depression.

**Set the Stage**

There is an important aspect of explaining depression to loved ones that comes after data collection but before the actual conversation. The aspect is setting up the environment in a way that is more conducive to a productive conversation.

When you want to have a critical discussion, you do not want a loud or distracting setting. You want the situation to be calm and under control.

*Next page: being assertive, but knowing when to walk away.*

**Set the Stage**

The best settings for the conversation will:

- Be quiet and comfortable
- Be free from extraneous distractions like loud music or TV shows
- Make the conversation the center of the meeting
- Only involve the person or people you wish to speak to

It does not matter what you have to say or how you say it if the setting is undesirable. When the stage is set well, the message can be received clearly.

**Be Assertive**

Now that you have taken your time to gather the best data about your symptoms, you have researched your diagnosis, and you have set the stage for success, you can communicate effectively with the people in your life. Plan your method of communication.

Knowing their stance and addressing it directly will enable you to be more persuasive. Remember that being assertive means you are able to clearly express your thoughts and feelings to others while respecting their beliefs.

Being assertive also means walking into a situation with a goal for your communication.

What do you hope this conversation achieves? What do you hope you and your loved one gain from this act? Be sure your goal is reasonable, otherwise you will leave let down and disappointed.

Speaking assertively involves staying objective and calm. These aspects can be trying since depression is an

emotional topic for many that deal with its effects.

Because of this, work to stay grounded in the foundation of facts and figures you have collected about yourself and others with the condition. If you become overly emotional or fueled by irrationality, your message will be lost.

The final feature of assertive communication is your listening. You hope your loved ones will listen to what you have to say, so you should return the favor. Your listening will help move the conversation forward and reduce the risk of miscommunication and frustration from all parties.

**Bring Them Along**

Sometimes people will struggle to understand your point-of-view regarding the impact of depression in your life. These people may benefit from speaking to an authority on the matter like your mental health providers.

If you have an upcoming appointment with your therapist or psychiatrist, offer for them to come along for the session. Here, they can gain information from another source that can speak on the matter with more objectivity and expertise.

They may be more inclined to side with the professional and might be more comfortable asking them questions about the condition. This exercise will provide them the opportunity to learn more about treatment and the likely prognosis.

**Know When to Walk Away**

It is a simple fact that not all loved ones will be understanding or supportive of your depression, no matter how assertively you communicate your needs and wants. This is not your fault, or something you did or did not do well. Strained relationships are common with depression.

You don’t get to choose your family and you don’t choose to have depression, but you can choose the level of contact you have with unsupportive people in your life. Strive to have positive relationships with many people while being realistic.

If the overall outcome of the relationship is negative, plan ways to reduce contact. Continued exposure will only increase your depression.

Deciding to end the relationship should never be taken lightly or made during a period of anger and frustration. It should be a well thought-out course of action based on your long-term mental health. Consult with others before any permanent decision is finalized.