How to Help a Loved One With Depression

by NATASHA DEVINE

How to Help Someone With Depression

Depression offers no prejudice, touching people from all walks of life, young and old alike. It affects everyday life causing pain, anger, and sadness, and not just to those suffering, but for those who love them.

When a friend or family member is sick, it's usually our first instinct to want to help them or try to fix them.

This can be challenging when it comes to a mental illness such as depression because while it is treatable, it often takes time and some lifestyle adjustments before there is a noticeable change.

Helping someone with depression doesn't have to be difficult; there are some things that you can do to help and show your support in the meantime.

Know the Symptoms

Family and friends are in the best position for helping someone with depression. That is why it is important to recognize the signs and symptoms of depression.

Loved ones usually notice there is a problem long before the depressed person does, and your concern and encouragement can persuade someone to seek help.

You can help your loved ones by recognizing what they can’t and expressing what's hard to define.

Here are some of the primary symptoms to watch for:

- **Sleep problems.** If your love is struggling to sleep at night or waking up during the evening or very early in the morning, this might be a depression warning sign. Sleeping too much is also a possible sign.
- **Changes to eating habits.** If your loved one is eating too much or too little, they could be depressed. Weight loss and weight gain are also telltale signs if you are not aware of your loved one’s new eating habits.
- **A bleak outlook.** Your loved one might frequently express sadness, irritability, or moodiness. They may talk about feeling hopeless or helpless.
- **Complaints of aches and pains.** Frequent headaches, stomachaches, back pain or all over body pain are physical symptoms of depression, as is feeling exhausted and drained all the time.
- **Feelings of anger and irritability.** It is a struggle just getting through the day when you are depressed. The simplest tasks can become difficult and cause anger and frustration.
- **A loss of interest in most everything.** If your loved one has lost interest in work, spending time with loved ones, hobbies, sex, etc. and has resorted to activities that require little willpower and energy, such as sitting in front of the TV all the time, there is a reason to be concerned.

The symptom that stood out for me was a general feeling of mental and emotional exhaustion that I tried to express to loved ones but couldn't. I felt mentally and emotionally tired, and relief seemed out of my reach.

Loving Someone with Depression

When helping someone with depression, you might feel helpless, confused, angry, scared and worried. It is okay for you to believe these things because loving someone with depression isn't easy.

You probably wonder what it is you can do to help your loved one. The best thing you can do is to learn all you can about depression and how to talk about it with your loved one.

As you are helping someone with depression, make sure you are looking after your emotional health because you won't be much help to anyone if you are struggling too.

And thinking about your needs isn't selfish. Your strength will allow you to provide your depressed friend or family member with the support they desperately need.

Understanding Depression

Depression is not a temporary mood change nor is it a sign of weakness. It's a real medical disorder that causes emotional, physical, cognitive and behavioral symptoms.

Because depression carries a societal stigma, many people who suffer from depression are afraid or too ashamed to seek help. Others downplay their symptoms and suffer in silence.

I had viewed depression as a sign of weakness and was afraid that the people who relied on me to be strong couldn't anymore. I didn't seek help out of fear of disappointing loved ones.

You can't "fix" your loved one, or you cannot force them to apply for treatment. Recovery from depression is in their hands.

All you can do is offer support, love, and kindness and the rest is up to them when helping someone with depression.

If you can be there your loved one, you should. Even when they push you away and even when they are difficult to be around because one day, that person will be stronger and he or she will appreciate your patience, kindness, and love.

Next page: Why starting the conversation is helping someone with depression.

Start the Conversation

If someone in your life has been displaying the symptoms above and you're concerned for their well-being, it's important to talk to them about it.

They may be already getting treatment but letting them know that you're there for them is important; it's good for them to have people they can trust for support.

It can be difficult to start a conversation like this because there's often a lot of emotion involved, but by letting them know that you're looking out for their health and their best interest, you should be able to get the conversation started.

Honest communication is essential when helping someone with depression as it shows that you're trustworthy and supportive.

Talking to Your Loved One

It can difficult to find the words when helping someone with depression. You are probably worried they may get angry with you, feel insulted or ignore your concerns altogether.

The following suggestions might help with talking to your loved one:

- **Try to be a good listener.** Listening is far more important than giving advice or trying to fix someone. Often the simple act of talking to someone with depression and encouraging them to share their feelings without judgment goes a long way.
- **Have more than one conversation.** A single conversation won't fix everything because depressed people tend to withdraw. You need to keep showing up and expressing your concern and willingness to hear what they need to talk about.
- **Find the right words.** Starting the conversation isn't always easy, and you might not know the right words.
- **Be supportive.** By saying the right things, it shows your friend or family member they are loved and that they are not alone in what they are feeling.

Starting the conversation by saying something like, "I'd like to talk to you because I'm concerned. I've noticed some changes in your behavior, and I want to make sure that you're okay," is a great start.

This is an excellent way to express how you're feeling and takes some of the pressure off them. Referring to yourself and saying "I've noticed" or "I'm concerned" immediately lets them know that you care and are there for support.

What to Say

If someone you love has told you that they are suffering from depression, it can be difficult to know what to say, especially if you haven't experienced a depressive episode or been close to someone experiencing depression.

Don't be afraid to ask questions; this is an excellent way to show that you're interested. Hearing the information directly from them is also helpful for you, as you will likely have a better understanding of what they are experiencing.

Here are some ideas of what to say to initiate a conversation:

- When did it start?
- Did something happen to trigger it?
- Have you experienced this before?
- Have you looked into treatment options?
- What can I do to help you?
- How can I best show my support?
- I have noticed you have been feeling down, so I wanted to check in.
- You're not alone in this; I am here for you if you need me.
- I may not understand what you're going through, but I will do my best to help when I can.

What Not to Say

Starting a conversation with, "You've been acting different," or something similar puts a direct focus on them and may come across as being confrontational.

Do your best to avoid complaining or negative conversation; it could come across as being insensitive or potentially add to their mood. Don't avoid negative phrases like "cheer up" or "lighten up" if they are complaining.

Here are some additional things to not say:

- We all get sad sometimes.
- It’s all in your head.
- Look on the bright side.
- Snap out of it.
- What’s wrong with you?
- Why aren’t you better yet?

Next page: Ways you can be supportive, and additional tips on how to help someone with depression.

Showing Support

Aside from knowing the symptoms and telling the person affected that you're there for them, here are some other ways that you can show support:

Recommend Helpful Resources

If your loved one has just recently been diagnosed it's important for them to have some resources available to them.

Providing them with the resources that have helped you is not only an excellent way to show support, but it also shows how much you care about them because you've done research.

Join a Class Together

Classes and activities are great ways to battle depression; it doesn't have to be a fitness class, as creative outlets are also helpful.

Signing up together makes it more fun and provides you with an opportunity to get them engaged in something new.

Get Out of the House

Those suffering from depression often don't have the energy or motivation to leave the house. Offering to go for a walk, even just around the block can help to lift someone's spirits.

If they're up for it, take them out for coffee or a meal; they'll enjoy spending time with you, and it will break up their routine.

Be Patient

Depression is a hard battle; some are affected a lot more than others, and it can take a while before they find a treatment that works for them. It can be frustrating to see your loved one suffering, but it's important that you continuously remind them of your support and don't give up on them.

Don't Criticize

Chances are they are already pretty hard to themselves, so you need to step in with positive words and gentle reminders that they are loved.

Depression affects everybody differently, and they may have some good days, and then all of a sudden have a bad one. Don't criticize them for that; just continue showing your love and support and remind them that even though it probably doesn't feel like it, the bad day(s) will pass.

Next page: How to encourage treatment and why it's important to look after yourself too, and additional tips on

how to help someone with depression.

Encouraging Your Loved One to Seek Treatment

Depression isn't something that goes away overnight or over a week's time or even over a month. Depression takes months and even years to recover from.

No one beats depression out of pure or extraordinary willpower. It takes time, effort and a lot of positive changes every single day to get better.

People who are depressed need support, and you can start by encouraging your loved one to seek out professional help. But getting a depressed person help isn't going to be an easy task.

Depression takes away motivation, willpower, and energy. Even something as simple as making an appointment with a therapist takes more strength than you can ever imagine.

Depression also makes people feel helpless and hopeless. It also brings about negative feelings, which can result in anger and resentment towards you – the person trying to help.

Getting your loved one to seek out treatment will come with obstacles. And the biggest challenge is getting them to admit they are depressed and they need help.

If your loved one is resistant to getting help, you may want to offer to make an appointment with a therapist and even going with them to their first session.

Supporting Their Treatment

Your loved one will need love and validation while they are in treatment. You will need to be patient and compassionate even when you are dealing with negativity, hostility and a whole range of emotions from your depressed loved one.

If you want your loved one's treatment experience to be successful, you can help by:

- **Providing help.** This could mean making and driving them to appointments, researching treatments, and making sure they are taking medications. You can also help with household chores, cooking meals or running errands.
- **Setting a good example.** If you want your loved one to have a happier and more positive mindset, you must lead by example. Taking care of yourself by eating healthy, being active, avoiding drugs and alcohol, and seeking support are all ways to be a good example.
- **Be realistic.** Your loved one is not going to get better overnight, and they will struggle along the way. Have patience and don't get upset with that person when it seems like they aren't taking treatment seriously.

Take Talks About Suicide and Dying Seriously

This might be hard for you to believe about your loved one, but too many depressed people think about death and suicide.

Depression clouds your judgment and leaves you thinking of no other way out. If your loved one is depressed, suicide is a real concern.

Pay attention to the following warning signs:

- Talking about death, dying, suicide or harming oneself

- Expressing feelings of self-hate and hopelessness
- Acting in dangerous ways
- Getting affairs in order or saying goodbye

If you think your loved one is thinking about suicide, talk to him or her right away. Talking openly about suicide could save someone’s life.

If you still have concerns after talking to your loved one, seek out professional help immediately. You can take that person to the nearest emergency room or call 911 if you think the threat of self-harm is imminent.

You can also call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-TALK, and they will direct you in how to proceed in getting help for your loved one. This hotline offers free assistance and is available 24 hours day, 365 days a year.

Look After Yourself First

When offering to help someone with depression, you have to take care of yourself and your health first; it's important to set boundaries or guidelines for yourself so that you don't become burnt out.

If you're exhausted or feel like you're wearing thin, you won't be much support for your loved one, so make sure that you are sticking to your routine. It's great that you're willing to help them, but it's important to remember that you're not their therapist, so you don't have to take on all the responsibility.

If you feel that this person needs more support than you can give, encourage them to seek outside therapy. This may help them to regain some independence and find ways of coping on their own.

Conclusion

Having aid and support of loved ones can be of great benefit when helping someone with depression. It's great that you are willing to help, but it's important to look after yourself first. Encourage them to seek the treatment they need if they haven't already.

Other ways to help or show your support is to initiate conversations and get involved in activities with them. It can be hard to see someone you love going through a battle with mental illness so be patient and do what you can.

They may not always express it, but I'm sure they greatly appreciate your love and continued support.