

6 Ways to Help a Partner Deal With Depression

If your husband / boyfriend or wife / girlfriend suffers with depression you may feel helpless, but there are ways you can support a depressed partner

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Learn about depression

While the essential feature of major depressive disorder is a period of at least two weeks during which there is either depressed mood or loss of interest or pleasure, depression is not a static illness. People with depression can have very good days, even a few good days in a row, only to experience significantly depressed mood once again. There is an ebb and flow to depression that isn't always understood by loved ones.

Depression can include the following symptoms:

- Feelings of sadness, tearfulness, or hopelessness
- Changes in appetite (including weight gain or loss)
- Sleep disturbance (sleeping too much or too little)
- Loss of interest or pleasure in normal activities
- Fatigue (even small tasks can require extra time)
- Anxiety or agitation
- Anger outbursts

- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt (including ruminating on past events)
- Trouble thinking, concentrating, or making decisions
- Frequent thoughts of death, including suicidal thoughts
- Unexplained physical symptoms

An important first step in helping your partner is to understand the disease. Symptoms of depression can vary, and can change over time. You can certainly read about depression and consult a professional for more information, but the best way to understand how your partner experiences depression is to ask open-ended questions and use empathetic listening.

Be there

You might feel like the best way to be helpful is to find the best available treatment in your area, find support groups, or talk to other people battling depression to find out what “works,” but often the best thing you can do for your partner is simply show up.

You don’t have all the answers, and that’s okay, but what you can do is sit and listen. You can hold your partner’s hand, offer hugs, and be present. You can respond with encouraging statements:

- “Tell me what I can do to help.”
- “You are important to me.”
- “I am here for you.”
- “We will get through this together.”

Encourage treatment

For many people with depression, symptoms are severe enough to cause noticeable problems in daily activities, such as work, school, social activities, or relationships. Other people, however, might not recognize that they’re depressed. They might not understand the symptoms of depression and think that their feelings are just something they have to endure.

All too often, people feel that they just have to will themselves better, but depression seldom improves without treatment. You can help your partner by encouraging treatment and being there during appointments.

Help your partner consider getting treatment by doing the following:

- Share the symptoms you've noticed.
- Express your concern.
- Express your willingness to help, including making and preparing for appointments.
- Discuss what you've learned about depression.
- Talk about treatment options, including psychotherapy, medication, and lifestyle changes.

Create a supportive home environment

It's important to remember that your partner's depression isn't anyone's fault. While you can't fix it, your support will help your partner work through this difficult time.

Changes in lifestyle can make a big difference during the treatment process. Because depression can zap a person's energy and affect both sleep and appetite, it can be difficult for depressed people to make healthy choices. You can help:

- Focus on healthy eating. Get your partner involved in planning and cooking healthy meals together to encourage better food choices.
- Exercise together. Daily exercise can boost your mood. Plan a daily walk or bike ride to inspire getting back to exercise.
- Help your partner stick with treatment. Whenever possible, drive to appointments together and sit in the waiting room. Psychotherapy can be emotionally exhausting in the early stages. Having support helps.
- Create a low stress environment. Routines can help depressed people feel more in control of their day-to-day lives. Consider creating a daily schedule to handle meals, medications, and chores.

- Make plans together. Depression can cause a loss of interest in pleasurable activities. To that end, depressed people sometimes avoid social interactions. Make a weekly date to rent a movie, go for a hike, or even play board games. Start small to help your loved one begin socializing again.

- Give positive reinforcement. When people feel hopeless, they tend to judge themselves harshly. Be sure to point out strengths and areas of improvement to help your partner see progress.

Focus on small goals

Depression feels overwhelming. When someone is severely depressed, even the act of getting out of bed can feel like a monumental task.

You can help your partner by setting and acknowledging small goals and daily achievements. Breaking down larger tasks (i.e. applying to new jobs) into smaller tasks (i.e. update resume, write cover letter, research available openings) can help your partner take small steps toward returning to normal daily activities. For people who struggle to get out of bed each day, focus on getting up, taking a shower, and eating a healthy meal. Your partner is likely to improve with treatment, but you will need to practice patience and understanding when working through a depressive episode.

Know the warning signs of suicide

The risk of suicide is always elevated during major depressive disorder. It's important to know the red flags and get immediate medical assistance:

- Talking about suicide
- Getting a means to attempt suicide, such as purchasing a gun or stockpiling pills
- Extreme mood swings - very high one day and deeply discouraged the next
- Social withdrawal
- Preoccupied with thoughts of death
- Noticeable changes in normal daily routines
- Feeling overwhelmed with hopelessness

- Engaging in risky or self-destructive behavior, including drug or alcohol abuse or reckless driving
- Giving away belongings
- Saying goodbye
- Getting affairs in order
- Developing personality changes

Caring for a partner with depression is emotionally taxing for the caregiver. It's important to practice self-care and increase your own support network during this time.