

How to Help Someone Who's Depressed

What to do

By Ashlee Davis

When someone you know and love is clinically depressed, you want to be there for that person. Still, keep in mind that your friend or loved one has a medical condition, so giving support may mean more than just offering a shoulder to cry on.

"There are many things you can do to make them feel better," says Jackie Gollan, PhD, assistant professor in the department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago, but medical care may be what they really need to recover.

Here are nine helpful things you can do for someone with depression.

1. Realize treatment is key

Depression is a medical condition requiring medical care. As a family member or friend, you can listen to the person and give your support, but that might not be enough.

If you keep this in mind, it can prevent you from losing patience or getting frustrated with them because your best efforts don't "cure" their depression.

"People that are depressed can't sleep it off; they can't avoid it," says Gollan. "You can give care and support, but it's not going to solve the problem."

2. Get active in their care

The best thing you can do for someone with depression is support his or her treatment. Tell your friend or loved one that depression is a medical problem and ignoring it will not make it go away.

"If someone breaks their leg, they are taken to a doctor or hospital," says Gollan. "If someone has depression, they need medical care and psychosocial support."

3. Talk about it

Let them know that you and others care about them and are available for support. Offer to drive them to treatment or, if they want to talk to you about how they're feeling, know what to listen for.

"This can reduce risk of suicide," says Gollan. "Listen carefully for signs of hopelessness and pessimism, and don't be afraid to call a treatment provider for help or even take them to the ER if their safety is in question."

4. Stay in contact

Call or visit the person and invite her or him to join you in daily activities. People who are depressed may become isolated because they don't want to "bother" other people.

You may need to work extra hard to support and engage someone who's depressed.

"Activities that promote a sense of accomplishment, reward, or pleasure are directly helpful in improving depression," says Gollan. "Choose something that the person finds interesting." Still, keep in mind that they may not feel interested in the activity right away.

Routines that promote exercise, nutrition, and a healthy amount of sleep are helpful.

5. Focus on small goals

A depressed person may ask, "Why bother? Why should I get out of bed today?" You can help answer these questions and offer positive reinforcement.

"Depressive avoidance and passivity can be reduced through activation [to help the person regain a sense of reward] and small goals of accomplishment," says Gollan.

Document and praise small, daily achievements—even something as simple as getting out of bed.

6. Read all about it

Books about depression can be useful, especially when they are reliable sources of advice or guidance that's known to help people with depression.

Books can often shed light on the types of treatment available.

Gollan recommends books like *The Feeling Good Handbook*, *Mind Over Mood*, and *Overcoming Depression One Step at a Time*.

"Blogs are pretty risky," she says, "unless you are sure the sources are reliable."

7. Find local services

Use support services in your community or online resources such as *National Alliance on Mental Illness* to help you find the right specialists to consult on depression treatment. A primary-care physician or an ob/gyn can also provide referrals for a psychiatrist.

Some people with depression may not recognize that they're depressed. Explain to them that the condition can get progressively worse, even become chronic, if not treated early. Hence, it's worth investigating supportive services and specialists.

8. Encourage doctor visits

Encourage the person to visit a physician or psychologist; take medications as prescribed; and participate in cognitive behavioral therapy for depression.

Gollan suggests checking the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies or the American Psychological Association to locate psychologists and medical centers' psychiatry departments.

9. Pay attention

If someone you love has been depressed in the past, pay attention if the person is experiencing some of the riskier life phases (in terms of depression), such as adolescence or a recent childbirth.

Also, if the going is rough for him or her emotionally due to marital separation, divorce, job loss, a death in the family, or other serious stress, be ready to step in to help.