



Supporting a Person With Depression

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BEYOND MY LABEL

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Contents

Introduction	3
Understanding Depression.....	4
Major Depression	4
Disruptive Mood Regulation Disorder.....	4
Persistent Depressive Disorder	5
Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD).....	6
Situational Depression	5
Bipolar Disorder	6
Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).....	6
Peripartum or Postpartum Depression	6
Psychotic Depression	7
How Depression Works	8
Tips to Help a Friend or Loved One with Depression.....	9
Self-Care Tips for the Caregiver	11

Introduction

When you see someone you care about battling in any way, you naturally want to help. Watching someone battle depression can trigger similar symptoms in yourself as well, because you feel helpless and may not know exactly what to do. Before you can help someone close to you deal with depression, it is better you understand it.

That is the focus of this short report.

Getting to know how depression develops, what chemical processes are involved, the different types of depression and effective treatment methods are all discussed below. You will discover what actions to take in supporting a person living with depression, and also what you should not be doing or saying. Also covered, is how to identify if you are developing some level of depressed emotional state as well, which is often common with carers who help others fight depression.

Finally, you need to know the best thing to do when someone's depression leads to thoughts and comments about suicide. Even mild depression can become serious if not treated properly. In many cases this leads an individual to believe that suicide is his or her only option. The best practices for responding to a person with suicidal problems are mentioned below. Let's get started by taking a look at some main types of depression.



Understanding Depression

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), types of depression include major depressive disorder, disruptive mood dysregulation disorder, persistent depressive disorder (dysthymia), premenstrual dysphoric disorder, substance/medication-induced depressive disorder, depressive disorder due to another medical condition, and other specified and unspecified depressive disorders. Note that bipolar is now in a separate category. Depression can be mild through to extreme or major, and can have either a minor or major impact on a person's life. The severity of the issue has a lot to do with which of the following types of depression a person is experiencing.

1 – Major depression (Major depressive disorder)

Mental health professionals sometimes call this type of depression a major depressive disorder. This condition is highlighted by feeling depressed almost all of the time, with very few upbeat, positive emotions. It is hallmarked by problems losing or gaining weight, sleep issues, no energy, and feelings of worthlessness and guilt.

From my own experience there were other feelings such as a complete feeling of nothingness.

Before diagnosing someone with major depression, your doctor has to identify at least 5 symptoms that indicate this issue.

2 – Disruptive mood regulation disorder

This type of depression often involves temper outbursts (usually at least a few times per week), and irritable or angry mood. It is common among children and is diagnosed before ten years of age.

3 – Persistent Depressive Disorder

If your depression lasts for more than 2 years, you will most likely be diagnosed as having a persistent depressive disorder. In the past this term was used in relation with two different conditions, 1) dysthymia, or low-grade persistent depression, and 2) chronic major depression.

Low self-esteem, a lack of energy, sleep problems, fatigue, dramatic changes in appetite and hopelessness are common symptoms. Medication and/or psychotherapy is usually prescribed.



4 – Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD)

This situation is experienced by women only. Sometimes referred to as PMS (premenstrual syndrome), it is a condition characterized by physical and emotional symptoms including fatigue, problems concentrating, anxiety, changes in body weight due to abnormal appetite habits, irritability and mood swings. A woman's reaction to PMDD occurs at the start of her monthly menstrual cycle.

Other forms:

Situational depression

This depressed state is appropriately named. Psychiatrists don't technically recognize situational depression. As with the other mental health conditions on this list, symptoms include a depressed mood, fatigue, a lack of energy, and feelings of helplessness and worthlessness.

In the case of situational depression you develop depression because a specific situation has occurred.

It is certainly natural to develop negative emotions and feelings surrounding the death of a loved one. A divorce, job loss or other stressful event could also trigger a bout of situational depression. Psychotherapy and "talking it out" is often very successful in treating this condition. Untreated, situational depression could develop into a chronic disorder.

Bipolar Disorder

In lay terms, this is considered a state of manic depression. A person with bipolar will express moods and emotions in vastly different ranges. A typical or normal situation for most people can trigger either an extremely high-energy, "over-the-top" response, or a severely depressed, "down" mood and reaction.

During their low periods, people with bipolar disorder will show signs of major depression. Since this condition is characterized by extremely high and extremely low moods and behaviours, a mood stabilizer such as lithium is often recommended.



Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

SAD is brought about by the changes of the seasons. Also called the "winter blues", seasonal affective disorder affects as many as 3 in 10 people living in regions where winter is accompanied by cold weather and lower levels of sunlight.

Winter days grow shorter, and humans are exposed to less sunlight. This triggers a chemical reaction that leads to typical depression symptoms. Light box therapy, medications, aromatherapy and lifestyle changes are all successful treatment methods.

Postpartum/postnatal depression

Postpartum depression in its most dramatic form can lead to suicide, and even cause a woman to take the lives of her child or children. The onset of postpartum depression generally occurs in the weeks and months immediately following childbirth.

This emotional state can be absent after having one or more children, and then develop after the birth of a subsequent child. Antidepressants are often required to control the powerfully unrealistic emotions of this condition that can lead to possibly harmful behavior.



Psychotic Depression

This is a terrible state for the individual that experiences it. Not only are depression symptoms noticed, but psychotic behaviors are evidenced as well. A person may see or hear things that are not present, and potentially harmful delusions and other false beliefs are very strongly held.

A sense of paranoia is common.

This leads someone to wrongly believe that others are trying to harm them or are "out to get them". A combination of antipsychotic and antidepressant drugs is usually suggested. Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is used as a treatment method in severe cases. Under anesthesia, someone experiencing psychotic depression receives small electrical charges to the brain which actually trigger a brief seizure when ECT is chosen.

How Depression Works

Often times, a person with depression is told to "just snap out of it". This is an archaic and inaccurate approach to treating the problem. Depression happens because of chemical and hormonal processes in the human mind and body. A person can no more simply will their depression away than they can will themselves to fly.

This is usually because a chemical imbalance has occurred. Until that imbalance is corrected, the symptoms of depression are experienced, and sometimes constantly.

Depression is a very complex disease. In its most basic sense however, faulty mood regulation in the brain is promoted because of imbalances in a person's levels of serotonin, melatonin and other neurotransmitters and hormones. Nerve cell connections, cellular growth and the proper functioning of the circuitry are impacted in a negative manner.

The stress hormone cortisol is released, which is directly linked to higher levels of inflammation throughout the body. This is how depression can wreak physical damage, as well as cause the emotional problems associated with it. Research also shows that the complex chemical process which promotes depression can be triggered by external events, such as the loss of a loved one, financial problems and other circumstances which negatively influence a person's emotional state.

Tips to Help a Friend or Loved One with Depression

Supporting someone with depression isn't always easy. Medication, aromatherapy, psychiatric intervention and light boxes are all treatment options a mental health professional may suggest. As a caregiver, you can use the following tips proven to limit the downside of depression to help support the person you care about while he or she heals.



Encourage a healthy conversation – Therapists, counsellors and psychiatrists understand the power of communication to heal. Encouraging your loved one to talk about the physical and mental emotions and symptoms they are experiencing often helps that individual adopt a healthy realisation of what they're going through.

Recommend professional options – Sometimes a doctor or mental health professional needs to be called in. If your efforts are all in vain, suggest professional help.

Help out with daily tasks and responsibilities – It is a good idea to keep your loved one active, if possible. Often, a person with depression just simply does not have the emotional and mental energy to function normally. Handling everyday responsibilities can be a big help.

Keep in constant contact – You need to "check in" frequently. Supporting someone who is experiencing depression means constantly monitoring their situation, feelings, emotions and behaviour.

Encourage physical activity – Exercise can help out of balance chemical and

hormonal ratios return to normal. Strenuous physical activity also releases "feel good" hormones that can combat the negative emotions characterized by depression.

Suggest healthy eating options – The food and drink you put into your body is responsible for as much as 65% to 75% of your physical and mental fitness levels. If the person you are supporting doesn't have the physical or emotional energy to prepare, cook and eat healthy foods, you might consider doing the cooking yourself. From my own experience of living with major depression, my carer did this over a period of time where I simply would not have done it. I did not even clean my teeth for around two years, so why cook when so much more energy is required? If left alone, I would have lived on tinned food, or very little.

Avoid saying certain things – Mental health workers suggest that the following statements and questions should be avoided when communicating with someone who is depressed.

- Just snap out of it.
- Look on the bright side.
- We all go through times like this.
- It's all in your head.
- I can't do anything about your situation.
- Shouldn't you be better by now?
- I'm sure you will be better soon.

Self-Care Tips for the Carer

As mentioned earlier, depression can come about as a result of a chemical imbalance. Feeling down, helpless and weak emotionally and physically can also occur as the result of a stressful situation. That means your efforts to help someone else recover from their depressed mental state can result in you developing depression yourself. The following best practices will keep you from becoming depressed as you help your spouse, friend or loved one through this difficult time.



Monitor your emotions regularly – Caring for, or supporting others increases your emotional vulnerability. In this report we have covered some different types of depression, their causes and symptoms, and also how to help others process what they are going through. Regularly use this knowledge to self-monitor your levels of mental and physical health. If you see symptoms developing, use the depression carer's tips in the last section on yourself.

Exercise regularly – A healthy mind promotes a healthy body. A strong body influences better mental health. Regular exercise can keep your hormones and chemical processes healthy and in balance, limiting your risk of developing a chemically-sponsored case of depression.

Care for yourself to care for others – Use the previous two tips to keep your physical and emotional health levels in good shape. You can't care for others until you care for yourself first.

Establish sensible barriers – When someone you care about, a spouse, family member or friend, experiences depression, you immediately want to help. Just make sure that you establish boundaries that allow you to offer care and support, but also recognize that taking care of yourself is not selfish, but sensible.

Limit your exposure to other stressful situations – Helping someone through depression can be incredibly stressful. This means it only makes sense to remove as many other sources of stress from your life, or the result could be burnout and physical exhaustion.

Eat right, get plenty of rest, and stay hydrated – Proper sleep, nutrition and hydration lead to a multitude of mental and physical health benefits. This trio of self-care goodness also keeps your immune system healthy, reduces the level of the stress hormone cortisol in your body, and naturally limits your risk of becoming depressed.

Reference:

American Psychiatric Association, (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA, American Psychiatric Association.