



Talking to a friend or family member affected by depression

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For people affected by depression, discussing their condition with family and friends, and asking for help, can be very daunting. They may feel too scared, ashamed or overwhelmed to admit how they are feeling. Tackling depression may seem an impossible challenge. This is when the encouragement and support of a friend is vital to help them feel less isolated and more motivated to actively work on overcoming depression.

By being a supportive friend, you can encourage someone with depression to seek help, receive a correct diagnosis and agree on a treatment with their doctor. But how do you approach this subject with them? You may feel that you need some advice to take the first step.

Here are some tips to start the communication:

Talking about depression with your friend

Some of the symptoms of depression (low mood, irritability and fatigue) can make it difficult for someone with depression to maintain friendships. Often someone with depression may withdraw from social contacts and may not actively seek to address their problem with their friends. And as mental health conditions are still often associated with a stigma in society, both parties may feel uncomfortable addressing the issue. This is why you as a friend may have to take the first step.

Symptoms of depression

Main symptoms

- Low/sad, irritable or indifferent mood
- Loss of interest and enjoyment in daily life
- Lack of energy



Physical symptoms

- Fatigue and reduced activity
- Disturbed sleep or excessive sleep
- Changes in appetite and weight
- Loss of sex drive
- Unexplained aches and pains, e.g. headache, backache
- Changes to the menstrual cycle

Other symptoms

- Poor concentration or reduced attention
- Difficulty in making decisions
- Tearfulness
- Restlessness, agitation or anxiety
- Low self-confidence and self-esteem
- Feelings of guilt
- Inability to cope with life as before
- Avoiding other people
- Bleak view of the future
- Morbid thoughts, ideas of self-harm

Everyone can feel a bit 'down' from time to time. In many people, this unhappiness is a reaction to an upsetting event, and they will start to feel better after a few days or weeks. It is a natural, short-lived response to stressful times in life. However, some people are unable to escape this low mood, and find it difficult to carry on with life as usual. They may experience long-lasting feelings of sadness and hopelessness, have unexplained aches and pains, suffer from poor sleep, anxiety, and/or lack interest and energy.

Depression affects different people in different ways – not everyone has the same symptoms. You can reassure your friend that it is important to seek professional help if these symptoms have been present for more than two weeks or if they have thoughts of self harm or suicide. Depression is a medical condition that is treatable, especially if dealt with the right way from the start.

Suggesting to a friend that they may have depression can be difficult. More often than not they will be grateful that someone they trust has noticed and wants to help, but it can still be hard to find a way to start the conversation.

Here are some suggestions:

- How are you? I'm your friend and you can tell me how you really feel.
- I've noticed that you seem a little down/ withdrawn/(or choose another symptom that you've noticed) and I'm here if you ever want to talk about it. Is there anything I can do to help now?



- Everyone feels low from time to time. It's a normal human emotion but feeling the way you do for more than two weeks means it's time to get help. I'll be there with you.
- You may feel hopeless and helpless but that's the illness talking. You don't have to feel this way if you let me help you.
- I picked up this leaflet about depression. I feel so lucky to have a friend like you who I could go to if I needed help and I want you to know I'm always here for you too.

You know your friend best and will have to judge the best approach to take. Some people find being direct works well, others choose to approach the subject slowly by talking about depression in general and leaving information where it can be easily found. Don't worry if your first attempt to talk doesn't go down well – people with depression often feel ashamed, angry and embarrassed but if you show that you're not going anywhere and aren't going to judge, then when they do decide to seek help they are more likely to come to you. Finally, don't try and deal with this on your own. You are going to need support too and the advice of others who know your friend can be invaluable.

Positive ways to show your support

Once you have started to talk to your friend about their depression, you should seek positive ways to show your support and reassure them that you will take them seriously and that you will be there for them to lean on.

You could do this by saying:

- You are important to me.
- You're not alone in this and I'm here for you.
- You don't have to feel guilty or ashamed, this isn't your fault
- I can't really understand what you are feeling, but I can offer my compassion and be a friend to you.
- I'm going to be there for you to lean on. I'm not going to leave you or abandon you.

- When all this is over, I'll still be here for you.
- I'm sorry that you're in so much pain. I am going to take care of myself, so you don't need to worry that your pain might hurt me. You're not alone and neither am I.
- I love you (if you mean it).



Also consider offering them a hug if you feel comfortable with this.

Try to avoid saying negative things such as:

- Pull yourself together.
- No one ever said that life was easy.
- Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Get a grip.
- So, you're depressed. Aren't you always?
- Just try not to be so depressed.
- There's always someone worse off than you are.
- It's your own fault.
- Believe me, I know how you feel. I feel depressed sometimes too.

Encourage your friend to seek professional help

Once you have approached the subject with your friend, encourage them to visit their doctor (if they haven't done this yet), and ensure that they take any prescribed medication as directed and follow any other therapies recommended by their doctor. Besides the professional support your friend will need, there are also ways in which you as a friend can help them get better.



Encourage lifestyle changes

Some lifestyle changes can help people cope with depression. You can help by encouraging your friend to:

- Go outside for some fresh air and sunlight every day – why not invite them for a walk or do some gardening if they don't feel like facing the world?
- Take regular moderate exercise – you can suggest you do the exercise together. Encourage them to participate in the exercise by reminding them how good they usually feel afterwards.
- Avoid being self-critical – you can help by recognising their accomplishments, however small, and making positive comments whenever possible, for example remind them that last week they had three good days and the week before they had two – they're getting better all the time.
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet – suggest cooking together or invite your friend over for a meal.

Be aware that your friend may just need to rest – offer practical support like shopping and cleaning the house. Try to balance motivating them without asking them to do more than they are ready for.

If your friend has stopped taking care of themselves you could try bringing round some nice soap or bubble bath. It will help them relax and improve their self-esteem.

You can also help them by:

- Staying in touch on the phone and/or by e-mail.
- Avoiding activities where too much alcohol is consumed as drinking can make symptoms worse.
- Making time for activities that you can enjoy together.



Generally, you should motivate your friend to learn about depression and depression treatments. This will encourage them to follow their course of treatment as instructed by their doctor and seek help if something doesn't work for them. They will also see that recovery is possible. You may find it useful to learn about depression together as your friend's concentration and memory might be affected. Audio books are a great way to absorb information if your friend finds it difficult to concentrate on written information.

If your friend is talking about or has attempted suicide

Thoughts of suicide and death can be a major symptom of depression, and should be taken very seriously. If a friend expresses suicidal ideas, reassure them that their life is important to you and many other people and that the appropriate treatment will help them to get better. No matter how hard it may seem to look after someone with suicidal thoughts, it is important to show that you care.

If your friend has suicidal thoughts, talk to other professionals (e.g. GP, emergency services, social services) for advice on how you can help them to stay safe, and encourage your friend to access help and support too. Keeping contact details for support helplines close to hand is also important e.g. Aware loCall Helpline 1890 303 302; Samaritans 1850 60 90 90; 1Life 1800 24 7 100.

About Lean on Me

Friends and family support can reduce time to treatment initiation and help improve recovery outcomes for those with depression. Indeed, the World Health Organisation says "psychological support from family, friends, or health providers is powerfully protective" in depression. Lean on Me encourages everyone to reach out to those affected by depression and be a friend to lean on.

Lean on Me has been created in partnership with the European Depression Association (EDA) – a non-governmental organisation which aims to raise awareness of depression in every European country – and with an educational grant from Lundbeck, an international pharmaceutical company that is deeply committed to improving quality of life for persons who have a disease of the central nervous system (CNS), like depression.

For more information please visit www.leanonme.net

