

10 Compassionate Ways to Support Loved Ones Suffering from Depression

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Depression is a very serious, isolating, but treatable disorder that affects millions of people of all ages from all walks of life. Depression causes tremendous emotional and physical pain, hurting not only those suffering from it, but affecting the people around them as well.

If your loved one is struggling with depression, you yourself, may also be experiencing a variety of difficult emotions including frustration, guilt, helplessness, anger, fear, and sadness. This is completely normal. It's not easy dealing with a family or friend's depression, and many times, you will be left feeling helpless and confused. But as pointless as it may seem at times, please know your support IS significant.

Here are 10 ways you can compassionately and effectively support your loved one who is struggling with depression.

1. Acknowledge that depression is a serious illness and should not be underestimated.

Depression is a medical condition. Do not confuse this with the emotion of "feeling sad & depressed." Most people still believe that depression is due to personal weakness, laziness, and even lack of religion, and as such, minimize the sufferer's pain and struggles; adding more feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and shame to the depressed.

It's important to understand that depression is not a choice and **sufferers cannot simply "snap out of it."** By understanding that depression is a real illness, you will be able to better support your loved one with compassion, patience, and an open mind.

2. Be there.

Simply sitting with your loved one while they cry, or quietly holding their hand as they struggle through their thoughts and emotions can be more helpful than trying to give advice or encouraging them to be physically active. Be aware that they could be feeling exhausted or irritable and may not be very pleasant company. It's important you do not take this personally because these are just byproducts of the illness.

Offering to accompany them to therapy sessions and doctor's appointments can be an incredible act of support as well. By doing this, you're showing your loved one that you believe that what they're struggling with is very real, and will not brush it off as something unimportant.

3. Release judgment.

Depression is not a weakness or personality flaw; it is a medical illness. Most people suffering from depression already feel ashamed, weakened, and worthless, so judging and criticizing them will do nothing other than make a painful situation even worse, and possibly isolate you from your loved one.

It's critical that you open yourself to accept the seriousness of the illness, in order to offer genuine support and compassion for your loved one who is struggling with this most painful, exhausting, and lonely condition.

4. Let them know they're not alone in this.

Struggling with depression can feel like navigating alone through a strange, long, dark tunnel that no one else can understand or believe. It will be important for you to clearly communicate to your loved one that they don't have to travel this path alone.

Let them know you are an ally—communicate to them that you believe there's light at the end of the tunnel and you'll see them through. "It's you & me vs. depression. Let's beat this."

5. Encourage treatment.

Some people with depression don't even realize that they have it, so seeking professional help doesn't even cross their minds. And many times, those who suffer from depression feel too ashamed to admit they are, or convince themselves to believe it can be overcome with time and willpower. It's rare for depression sufferers to get better without treatment.

Discuss the various treatment types with your loved one. If they are not yet receiving professional help, they may feel a sense of shame, weakness, or defeat which can hinder them from taking any action. Volunteering to schedule a doctor's appointment or to accompany them to see a counselor will help lighten the pressure and stress in taking these next positive steps. *If your loved one is strongly opposing treatment or shows damaging and harmful behaviors, please contact a doctor or other mental health professional for advice.*

6. Avoid "motivating" your loved one to "snap out" of depression.

What you say certainly can have a powerful impact on your loved one. Statements such as: "You need to focus on the good things in your life instead of the bad" simply imply that your loved one actually has a choice in how they feel and have chosen to be depressed. No matter how good your intentions may be, the depressed person will find it insensitive and possibly isolate themselves from you even more.

7. Don't minimize their pain or offer personal advice.

Glossing over their difficulties with statements such as: "Why must you be so sensitive" or "Just get through today because tomorrow will be better" invalidates their struggles through this very serious illness, and instead, makes them feel ashamed and inadequate by implying weakness or a personal flaw.

And unless you've personally suffered from depression, you'll quickly find that telling your loved one you know how they feel will not be very helpful. While your intention may be to help them feel less alone in their despair, comparing a depressed person's suffering to a hardship such as a recent breakup or a terrible fight with a close friend will only create more distance between you and your loved one.

What's possibly helpful is to suggest something simple such as: "How about we get some air outside while we talk?" because it opens up space for your loved one to share their thoughts and emotions with you, with less pressure or feelings of judgement, shame, and guilt.

8. Let them know that depression isn't their fault.

It's very important for the healing process, to communicate with your loved one that depression isn't their fault. Many sufferers feel they are depressed because they did something wrong, there is something wrong with them, or they're too weak to function properly.

Depression is an illness. People struggling with depression need to know they did not choose to be depressed—just as cancer patients don't choose to have cancer.

It is just as important that YOU know this too.

9. Ask what they're thinking.

Don't be afraid to check in with your loved one who is suffering from depression and ask what they're thinking. Many people believe asking a depressed person for their thoughts will provoke harmful ideas. Nothing can be further than the truth. Whatever is in your loved one's mind is there whether you ask about it or not. Asking will not make them worse, but NOT asking risks not knowing about something that could be lethal.

If you believe your loved one is considering suicide, don't be afraid to ask. Again, doing this will not provoke harmful ideas, but instead, allow your loved one to possibly open up to treatment. Please keep in mind that thoughts of suicide for a depressed person is **not an act of selfishness**. Depression clouds judgment and completely distorts one's thoughts, causing them to believe death is the only solution to end the excruciating pain they are feeling.

If you believe they are at an immediate risk for suicide, do not leave them alone. Dial 911 or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK.

10. Be gentle with yourself.

Helping someone you love as they struggle through depression can be exhausting and draining, both mentally and physically. Making sure your own needs are being met is not an act of selfishness. If you are not well, you will not be effective for yourself or your loved ones. Your health and strength will allow you to provide the comfort and support your depressed friend or family member needs.

Make sure you are getting enough sleep, eating well, maintaining healthy emotional boundaries, and getting some fun time for yourself.