

Depression: Mental Health First Aid Guidelines

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How do I know if someone is experiencing depression?

Only a trained professional can diagnose someone with depression. However, if you notice changes in the person's mood, their behaviour, energy levels, habits or personality, you should consider depression as a possible reason for these changes.

It is important to learn about depression so that you are able to recognise these symptoms and help someone who may be developing a depressive episode. Take the time to find out information about depression such as its causes, its symptoms, how it can be treated, and what services are available in your local area. It is important that you do not ignore the symptoms you have noticed or assume that they will just go away. It is also important that you do not lie or make excuses for the person's behaviour as this may delay getting assistance.

You should, however, remain aware that each individual is different and not everyone who is experiencing depression will show the typical signs or symptoms of depression.

What are the signs and symptoms of depression?

For a person to be diagnosed with clinical depression, they would have to have five or more of the following symptoms, including at least one of the first two, for at least two weeks:

- An unusually sad or irritable mood that does not go away;
- Loss of enjoyment and interest in activities that used to be enjoyable;
- Lack of energy and tiredness;
- Feeling worthless or feeling guilty when they are not really at fault;
- Thinking about death a lot or wishing they were dead;
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions;
- Moving more slowly or, sometimes, becoming agitated and unable to settle;
- Having sleeping difficulties or, sometimes, sleeping too much;
- Loss of interest in food or, sometimes, eating too much. Changes in eating habits may lead to either loss of weight or putting on weight.

How should I approach someone who may be experiencing depression?

Contrary to myth, talking about depression makes things better, not worse. If you think that someone you know may be depressed and needs help, give the person appropriate opportunities to talk. It can be helpful to let the person choose the moment to open up. However, if the person does not initiate a conversation with you about how they are feeling, you should say something to them.

It is important to choose a suitable time when both you and the person are available to talk, as well as a space where you both feel comfortable. Let the person know that you are concerned about them and are willing to help. If the person says that they are feeling sad or down, you should ask them how long they have been feeling that way.

Don't assume that the person knows nothing about depression as they, or someone else close to them, may have experienced depression before. At this point, you should ask the person if they would like some information about depression. If they do want some information, it is important that you give them resources that are accurate and appropriate to their situation. You should respect how the person interprets their symptoms. If the person doesn't feel comfortable talking to you, encourage them to discuss how they are feeling with someone else.

How can I be supportive?

Treat the person with respect and dignity

Each person's situation and needs are unique. It is important to respect the person's autonomy while considering the extent to which they are able to make decisions for themselves, and whether they are at risk of harming themselves or others. Equally, you should respect the person's privacy and confidentiality unless you are concerned that the person is at risk of harming themselves or others.

Do not blame the person for their illness

Depression is a medical illness and the person cannot help being affected by depression. It is important to remind the person that they have an illness and that they are not to blame for feeling "down."

Have realistic expectations for the person

You should accept the person as they are and have realistic expectations for them. You should let them know that they are not weak or a failure because they have depression, and that you don't think less of them as a person. Everyday activities like cleaning the house, paying bills, or feeding the dog may seem overwhelming to the person. You should acknowledge that the person is not "faking", "lazy", "weak" or "selfish." Ask the person if they would like any practical assistance with tasks but be careful not to take over or encourage dependency.

Offer consistent emotional support and understanding

It is more important for you to be genuinely caring than for you to say all the “right things”. The person genuinely needs additional love and understanding to help them through their illness so you should be empathetic, compassionate and patient. People with depression are often overwhelmed by irrational fears; you need to be gently understanding of someone in this state. It is important to be patient, persistent and encouraging when supporting someone with depression. You should also offer the person kindness and attention, even if it is not reciprocated. Let the person know that they will not be abandoned. You should be consistent and predictable in your interactions with the person.

Encourage the person to talk to you

Don't be afraid to encourage the person to talk about their feelings, symptoms and what is going on in their mind. Let the person know that you are available to talk when they are ready; do not put pressure on the person to talk right away.

Be a good listener

You can help someone with depression by listening to them without expressing judgement. Be an active listener; reflect back what the person has said to you before responding with your own thoughts. It is important to listen carefully to the person even if what they tell you is obviously not true or is misguided. Although the person may not be communicating well, and may be speaking slower and less clearly than usual, you must be patient and must not interrupt. If the person is repetitive try not to get impatient, but rather keep trying to be as supportive as possible.

Give the person hope for recovery

You need to encourage the person that, with time, some support and possibly treatment, they will feel better. Offer emotional support and hope of a more positive future in whatever form the person will accept.

What doesn't help?

There's no point in just telling someone with depression to get better as they cannot “snap out of it” or “get over it.”

- You should not be hostile or sarcastic when the person attempts to be responsive but rather accept these responses as the best the person has to offer at that time.
- Do not adopt an over-involved or over-protective attitude towards someone who is depressed.
- Do not nag the person to try to get them to do what they normally would.
- Do not trivialise the person's experiences by pressuring them to “put a smile on their face,” to “get their act together,” or to “lighten up”.
- Do not belittle or dismiss the person's feelings by attempting to say something positive like, “You don't seem that bad to me.”

- Avoid speaking to the person with a patronising tone of voice and do not use overly-compassionate looks of concern.
- Resist the urge to try to cure the person's depression or to come up with answers to their problems.

Should I encourage the person to seek professional help?

Everybody feels down or sad at times, but it is important to be able to recognise when depression has become more than a temporary experience for someone and when to encourage that person to seek professional help.

Professional help is warranted when depression lasts for weeks and affects a person's functioning in daily life.

You should ask the person if they need help to manage how they are feeling.

If they feel they do need help, discuss the options that they have for seeking help and encourage them to use these options. If the person does not know where to get help, offer to help them seek assistance.

It is important to encourage the person to get appropriate professional help and effective treatment as early as possible. If the person would like you to support them by accompanying them to a doctor's appointment, you must not take over completely; a person with depression needs to make their own decisions as much as possible.

Depression is often not recognised by health professionals; it may take some time to get a diagnosis and find a healthcare provider with whom the person is able to establish a good relationship. You should encourage the person not to give up seeking appropriate professional help.

What about self-help strategies?

People who are depressed frequently use self-help strategies. Some of these are supported by scientific evidence as effective, such as regular physical activity. The person's ability and desire to use self-help strategies will depend on their interests and the severity of their depression. Therefore you should not be too forceful when trying to encourage the person to use self-help strategies.

What if the person doesn't want help?

The person may not want to seek professional help.

You should find out if there are specific reasons why this is the case. For example, the person might be concerned about finances, or about not having a doctor they like, or they might be worried they will be sent to hospital. These reasons may be based on mistaken beliefs, or you may be able to help the person overcome their worry about seeking help.

If the person still doesn't want help after you have explored their reasons with them, let them know that if they change their mind in the future about seeking help they can contact you. You must respect the person's right not to seek help at all times unless you believe that they are at risk of harming themselves or others.

Other sources of help or information on depression:

Depression and Learning Disabilities:

This link gives a general overview, case studies, ways of helping and support groups all related to depression specifically for people with a learning disability.

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinfoforall/problems/depression/learningdisability.aspx>

This is a printable PDF file that may be of use – with or without support - to a person with a learning disability and depression to look at and understand their symptoms and also to look at ways in which they could invite help or help themselves.

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/Depression%20ld%20final.pdf>

Gives a short, generalized overview of depression and how it might be caused and affect someone with a learning disability.

<http://www.aboutlearningdisabilities.co.uk/depression-learning-disabilities.html>

Depression and Acquired Brain Injury:

This Australian website is well laid out and offers straightforward information and advice to those with an acquired brain injury and their carers.

<http://synapse.org.au/Psychological/depression-following-acquired-brain-injury-fact-sheet>

This fact sheet looks at: reasons, signs and symptoms, ways of helping [and self help] and also commonly available treatments for depression with an acquired brain injury.

<http://synapse.org.au/Medical/depression-and-acquired-or-traumatic-brain-injury-fact-sheet>

This document is from “The British Society of Rehabilitation Medicine and the British Geriatrics Society”.

These are guidelines and information on the use of anti-depressants in adults undergoing rehabilitation or recovery following a brain injury.

www.bgs.org.uk/Publications/Publication%20Downloads/ABI-Clinical1-1.doc

This UK based charity aims to help individuals with a brain injury to improve their life.

The site provides brief and general information relating to brain injury and a range of mental health issues.

<http://www.headway.org.uk/Emotional-and-Behavioural.aspx>

An in-depth article from Fergus Gracey, a clinical psychologist at the Oliver Zangwill centre for Neuropsychological Rehabilitation, in Ely, Cambridgeshire.

<http://www.acnr.co.uk/pdfs/volume2issue3/v2i3rehab.pdf>