

Patient Education Guide

Living with Depression



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This information is provided for general educational purposes only and is not intended to replace discussions with a doctor or other health care professional. All decisions regarding your care must be made in consultation with a health care professional, who can consider your specific condition and circumstances, and provide advice on improving your health and managing your condition.

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Introduction

Understanding Depression

Occasionally everyone has a bad day. A case of the blues. That down-in-the-dumps feeling that keeps you on the verge of tears. Unfortunately, sometimes this feeling lingers and may indicate a serious illness.



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Understanding Depression

Recognizing the Signs of Depression

Depression is a treatable illness

It may be helpful for you to understand that depression is not a personal weakness.

Like someone suffering from any illness, people diagnosed with depression may be experiencing a wide range of symptoms. While we may all have days when we experience some of these symptoms, people who suffer from depression continue to experience these symptoms over weeks or even months.

People with depression sometimes may develop accompanying physical symptoms like headaches, abdominal pain, or other aches and pains. They may not associate these physical symptoms with depression.¹ Talk to your health care provider to determine if your symptoms are due to depression.

Symptoms of depression should be present for at least 2 weeks and may include several of the following symptoms¹:

- No longer being interested in or looking forward to anything
 - A lack of motivation
 - Overwhelming sadness or a feeling that life is not worth living
 - Eating more or less and subsequent weight changes
 - Sleeping more or less
 - Less energy than normal/feeling tired all the time
 - Feeling worthless or unreasonably guilty
 - Trouble concentrating and making decisions
 - Feeling irritable and angry
 - Thinking about suicide and death
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Understanding Depression

What Causes Depression?

The exact causes of depression are unknown

Genetic and environmental factors and chemical imbalances may be risk factors associated with depression. In the United States, studies indicate that episodes of depression occur twice as frequently in women as in men.^{1,2}

Avoid Self-Medication

When you're depressed, drinking alcohol or taking nonprescribed drugs may seem like a possible solution. But they often make it more difficult for you to achieve your treatment goals. Alcohol or recreational drugs may increase your feelings of guilt or fatigue, and you may continue to feel that you are a burden on the people around you.

Heredity and previous episodes may increase your risk for developing depression.

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What You Can Do

Antidepressants and Talk Treatments

Treatment for depression may include the use of antidepressants and/or talk therapy.³ Depression is known to be associated with changes in brain chemicals or neurotransmitters.¹ Antidepressants are thought to reverse some of these changes. Some facts you should know about antidepressants⁴:

- They may take several weeks before you start to feel better.
 - They should not be stopped abruptly or without consulting your health care professional.
 - You may need to try different antidepressants (different medicines work for different people, as do various doses).
 - They may have side effects, some of which often decrease over the first weeks of use.
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Talk Therapy

Along with medicine, your health care provider may suggest talk therapy. A psychologist, a psychiatrist, a counselor, or some primary care doctors can provide talk therapy. If talk therapy is recommended, the most important thing is to find a trained person with whom you feel comfortable. Don't give up if you see someone and it is not a good match for you. Find someone else to talk to. Talking with someone can help you find ways to solve some of the issues in your life or learn to look at them differently. Studies have shown that for some patients with depression, talk therapy used with antidepressants may also help.³

Other Helpful Tips

It's important to remember that depression is a medical illness. Many people do get better. In addition to following your prescribed treatment plan, ask your health care provider if the following tips may also help.

- Stick to a routine (eat and sleep regularly).
- Try to do things that you enjoy or used to enjoy.
- Set small goals for yourself each day and try to achieve them.
- Talk with people you trust about how you are feeling.

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Depression Treatment Phases

Many people suffering from depression continue with antidepressant therapy past the initial treatment phase. Usually, experts on depression break treatment down into 3 phases⁴:

Phase 1:

During the first phase of therapy, the goal is to become virtually symptom free (achieve remission).

Phase 2:

During the approximately 20 weeks following remission, the goal is to maintain remission and prevent the return of symptoms (relapse).

Phase 3:

Your health care provider may decide to continue therapy to help protect you from having another depressive episode. Depression can be a long-term problem that requires therapy to prevent new episodes of depression.

Keep these points in mind:

The goal of therapy is to achieve remission and then keep symptoms from returning. By maintaining your commitment to treatment, you can hopefully continue to make progress.

Along with medicine, your health care provider may suggest talk therapy. A psychologist, a psychiatrist, a counselor, or some primary care doctors can provide talk therapy.

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Depression Treatment Phases

Sticking With It

It's important to remember to follow the therapy program your health care provider has mapped out for you. Regular follow-up visits with your health care provider may help you stick with your program and stay on the road toward reaching your treatment goals.

How long will I have to take my medication?

If antidepressants are prescribed for you, it is important to take them as your health care provider has directed. Even if you are feeling better, you should not skip or stop taking your medicine without consulting your health care provider. Depression is increasingly recognized as a “recurrent” (repeating) illness. People who've had past episodes of depression are more likely to have a new episode. In fact, the chances go up to approximately 70% after 2 episodes and roughly 90% after 3.¹

Sometimes people who suffer from depression try to convince themselves that they do not have this disease.

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Managing Your Depression

How You Can Help Manage Depression

When you are suffering from depression, it is often difficult to motivate yourself to do anything. If you are able to, however, there are some simple strategies that may help. You don't have to try them all — just choose the ones you think may help you.

Before you try any of these strategies, it is very important to talk with your health care professional.

Exercise

Exercise may help. You don't have to visit the gym regularly or run 5 miles. Start with a brisk walk each day. Maybe an exercise video or DVD would interest you. Set small goals for yourself that are easy to achieve, and increase your amount of activity as you start to feel better.

Plan pleasurable activities

Try to remember some of the things you used to enjoy doing: going to the movies with friends, visiting an art gallery, dining out, shopping. Try to achieve something small each day. When you're depressed, even the things you once enjoyed seem overwhelming and uninteresting, but if you try to focus on one small activity each day, it may help you feel better. It may also give you the feeling that you've achieved something, which is very important for reaching your treatment goals.

Stick to a daily routine

Sticking to a routine is often helpful for people suffering from depression. Simple daily tasks may have become very difficult. If you set up a basic routine for yourself and try to stick to it, you may find that you start to feel like your old self. Take time for personal hygiene and appearance. Eat and sleep regularly.

Surround yourself with support

Although your friends and relatives may not be able to completely understand what you are going through right now, you still need to be able to talk with people who love you. Don't think of yourself as a burden during this time. Having supportive people in your corner can sometimes help. Confide in family or a few trusted friends and let them know how you are feeling. Reach out to your health care provider or counselor and don't be afraid to be vulnerable.

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Sleeping Better

Depression often interferes with sleep. Developing good sleeping habits is a strong strategy to cope with this. **Here are some things that may help you to get a restful 8 hours:**

- Get up at the same time every day, including weekends.
 - Try not to spend time worrying while you're in bed at night.
 - Don't lie in bed tossing and turning. Get up and read a book, listen to music, or do something relaxing. When you start to feel sleepy, go back to bed.
 - Develop a routine that helps you sleep. Try a warm bath or shower, a mug of hot milk, or meditation.
 - Make your bedroom as comfortable and inviting as possible.
 - Avoid alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine.
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Getting Organized

If your health care provider prescribes antidepressant medication for you, it is important to take them at regular time intervals as prescribed. Keep a list of the medicines you are taking along with any over-the-counter drugs and vitamins or supplements. Use the *Your Notes* section at the back of this guide to help you get organized and track when you take your medicine. Remember, some medicines will interact with over-the-counter drugs, so they should be avoided. Talk to your health care provider if you have questions. And don't forget your pharmacist. Talking with your pharmacist can provide an extra support network.

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The Connection Between Suicide and Depression

Suicide is a very difficult area of depression to talk about, but it is necessary that you become aware of the risk factors. Up to 87% of people who commit suicide suffered from depression.⁵ Alcohol and drugs, which remove inhibitions, are often a factor in suicide attempts and deaths.

Your health care provider will play an active role in managing your treatment during times of higher stress in your life. You may find that your prescriptions are limited to avoid accumulation of too many pills. Additional talk therapy sessions may be added. It is very important during these times to refer to the Patient Action Plan and honestly report your feelings, symptoms, and/or signs of side effects. Above all, make sure you keep the lines of communication open between you and your health care provider. Be honest about your feelings with your health care provider, as well as loved ones and caregivers. Don't be embarrassed to freely discuss how you're feeling at this time. These people form your support group, and they are there to help you recover.

The following factors may contribute to suicidal thinking:

- The death of someone close to you⁶
 - Loss of an emotionally important relationship (separation, divorce)⁶
 - Loss of health and quality of life⁷
 - Chronic illness⁷
 - Unemployment⁷
 - Financial loss(es)⁷
 - Job loss(es)⁷
 - Physical, mental, and/or sexual abuse⁸
 - Abuse of alcohol and/or drugs¹
 - Previous suicide attempts or self-harming behavior¹
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Support for You

Other Sources for Help

Danger signs: Often, people considering suicide indicate through certain signals or behaviors that they may harm themselves, for instance, thoughts of death or suicide, a detailed plan for suicide, or taking steps to act on the plan.⁸

If you recognize any of these signs in yourself, you should seek medical help immediately. Talking to someone can help remind you of the things in your life that are worth staying alive for and the things you are capable of changing. Don't be ashamed to open up to someone.⁸

Below are some resources you may find helpful for learning more about depression and related subjects.

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)

120 Wall Street, 22nd Floor
New York, NY 10005
Toll-Free Phone: 1-888-333-2377
www.afsp.org

Families for Depression Awareness

395 Totten Pond Road, Suite 404
Waltham, MA 02451
Phone: 1-781-890-0220
www.familyaware.org

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

Science Writing, Press,
and Dissemination Branch
6001 Executive Boulevard
Room 8184, MSC 9663
Bethesda, MD 20892-9663
Toll-Free Phone: 1-866-615-6464
www.nimh.nih.gov

Mental Health America

2000 N. Beauregard Street, 6th Floor
Alexandria, VA 22311
Toll-Free Phone: 1-800-969-6642
www.mentalhealthamerica.net

American Psychological Association

750 First Street, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4242
Toll-Free Phone: 1-800-374-2721
www.apa.org

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

Colonial Place Three
2107 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201-3042
Toll-Free Phone: 1-800-950-6264
www.nami.org

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Your Notes

This guide offers an area for you to jot down notes that may help you when discussing your depression with your health care provider. Keeping track of your questions and answers will help you stay focused on your recovery.

My History

When did I first begin to feel symptoms of depression?

When was I first diagnosed with depression?

How many episodes have I experienced since my first diagnosis? When did they occur? Were there recognizable triggers that preceded these episodes?

What is my family history of depression? Have these relatives been treated?

Miscellaneous questions for my health care provider:

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Your Notes

Getting Organized

My prescription drugs:

My over-the-counter medications:

My vitamins/supplements:

Other:
