

## **What Can I Do When My Family Member Is Depressed?**

### Common Symptoms of Depression

1. Feeling sad, blue, or down
2. Losing interest in previously enjoyed activities
3. Experiencing a change in appetite or weight
4. Having a change in sleep patterns
5. Feeling tired and slowed down OR feeling restless
6. Feeling worthless or guilty
7. Having trouble concentrating, thinking, or making decisions
8. Having thoughts of death or suicide

### Common Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder

1. Feeling “high” or “on top of the world” or having an “overly” good mood
2. Needing less sleep than usual
3. Being more talkative than usual and/or pressured speech
4. Having racing thoughts and/or jumping quickly from one topic to another
5. Being easily distracted
6. Demonstrating excessive productivity and/or being more agitated than usual
7. Pursuing risky activities that can have bad consequences

### Common Causes of Depression

1. Major life events (e.g., death of loved one, retirement)
2. Genetic factors
3. Imbalance in the level of chemicals in the brain
4. Medical illness
5. Use of certain medications (some anti-convulsants or thyroid hormones)
6. Excessive use of alcohol

Suicide Warning Signs: There are several “red flags” that you want to pay special attention to if a loved one is talking about suicide. One warning sign does NOT mean that the person is definitely going to harm him/herself; rather, these cues may prompt you to explore the issue further:

1. Changes in the level of depression (more depressed or happier than usual), especially if he/she:
  - a. Has a specific plan for how to kill him/herself
  - b. Begins to get his/her affairs in order (e.g., writes a will, gives things away, systematically contacts old friends or relatives)
  - c. Feels worthless
  - d. Talks about having done an unforgivable behavior
  - e. Feels hopeless about the future
  - f. Hears voices saying to harm him/herself
2. Talks about being indestructible or having supernatural powers during a manic or delusional state
3. Talks about killing him/herself (“Everyone would be better off without me”)
4. Makes suicidal gestures (takes too many pills, cuts wrists, etc.)
5. Increases use of alcohol or other drugs.
6. Has previously attempted suicide OR has a history of being impulsive

What to do if your family member is suicidal

1. Talk about it! Asking about suicide will not put ideas in his/her head and will not make the situation worse. Ask – then listen. You may want to discuss coping strategies at a time when your loved one is not actively suicidal.
2. Offer emotional support by expressing your concern, care, and willingness to help.
3. Ask if he/she has a plan about how to kill him/herself. If so, then:
  - a. Seek professional help immediately.
  - b. Try to get the person to promise that he/she will not act on these plans without first talking to you, a hotline, or mental health professional.
  - c. Put away any objects that your family member may use to harm him/herself (guns, knives, pills, razors, etc.).
4. If the person is delusional, seek professional help.
5. If you don’t know what to do, call a professional (e.g., suicide hotline, mental health professional, police)

**SUICIDE HOTLINE: 1-800-SUICIDE**

**VETERANS AFFAIRS SUICIDE HOTLINE: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)**

**Oklahoma City Suicide Hotline: (405) 848-CARE**

## Local Treatment Options for Veterans Living with Depression/Bipolar Disorder

1. Depression-management skills class
2. Anti-depressant medications
3. REACH Project – family psychoeducation
4. Day Treatment Center
5. Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)

## Coping Strategies for the Family

### A. Do's

1. Acknowledge that depression is a legitimate illness – which is different from just having a “down” day.
2. Learn about the illness of depression:



### **Good Books on Depression:**

*The Feeling Good Handbook.* (1999). D. Burns. New York: Viking Penguin.

*What To Do When Someone You Love Is Depressed: A Practical, Compassionate, and Helpful Guide for Caregivers.* (1998). S. & M. Golant. New York: Henry Holt & Co.

*When Someone You Love Is Depressed.* (1996). L. Rosen & X. Amador. New York: Free Press.

### **Good Books on Bipolar Disorder:**

*The Bipolar Disorder Survival Guide: What You and Your Family Need To Know.* (2002). D. J. Miklowitz. New York: Guilford.

*Bipolar Disorder: A Guide for Patients and Families.* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (2006). F.M. Mondimore. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

*Surviving Manic Depression: A Manual on Bipolar Disorder for Patients, Families, and Providers.* (2005). E.F. Torrey & M.B. Knable. New York: Basic Books.

### **For Youth:**

*I'm Not Alone: A Teen's Guide to Living with a Parent Who Has a Mental Illness.* (2006). M. D. Sherman & D.M. Sherman. Edina, MN: Beaver's Pond Press.  
Available at [www.seedsofhopebooks.com](http://www.seedsofhopebooks.com)

*Wishing Wellness: A Workbook for Children of Parents with Mental Illness.* (2006). L.A. Clarke. New York: Magination Press.

Support And Family Education:  
Mental Health Facts for Families  
Michelle D. Sherman, Ph.D.

**Relevant Web Sites:**

[www.depression.org](http://www.depression.org) – comprehensive resources about depression

[www.dbsalliance.org](http://www.dbsalliance.org) – Depression and Bipolar Disorder Alliance

[www.depressionfallout.com](http://www.depressionfallout.com) – help for those dealing with a depressed loved one

[www.familyaware.org](http://www.familyaware.org) – Families for Depression Awareness

3. Have realistic expectations...but maintain hope!
4. Be an active team member in the care of your loved one. Ask questions of doctors, nurses, psychologists, and other healthcare providers.
5. Offer emotional support, patience, and compassion. Encourage your loved one to exercise and do activities that he/she used to enjoy.
6. Stay in contact with your social support network.
7. Obtain professional help for yourself when needed.
8. Maintain good sleep habits, both for you and your loved one.
9. Maintain a healthy diet; engage in regular exercise; avoid use of alcohol.

**B. Don'ts**

1. Try not to take the depression personally – it's not your fault! You cannot cure depression with love any more than you can cure cancer with love.
2. Don't exclude the depressed person from family discussions or decisions.
3. Don't try to do everything for the depressed person.
4. Don't criticize the person for his/her depressed behavior.
5. Don't feel that you need to apologize for your loved one.

Parts adapted from *When Someone You Love Has a Mental Illness* by R. Woolis (1992).