

Depression –

Information for family members and friends

You have found out that someone is suffering from depression. You would like to help but don't know how. This information is intended for family members and friends of people suffering from depression.

It contains advice on how to cope with this situation.

How does depression manifest itself?

Various symptoms may go hand in hand with depression. They may constitute a challenge for family members and other trusted persons and place a strain on shared interactions. Possible symptoms of depression are for example:

- low, depressed mood
- little interest and pleasure in activities that used to be meaningful and fun
- decreased drive or tiring easily
- difficulty paying attention, concentrating or making decisions
- decreased self-worth and self-confidence
- self-criticism and feelings of guilt
- slow movements and speech or inner disquiet
- problems going to sleep, waking up very early
- reduced appetite, weight loss or a strong urge to eat a lot
- suicidal thoughts or suicide attempts

In addition to the typical mental stress, depression may also present with physical symptoms, for example fatigue, gastrointestinal complaints, pain, breathlessness or a feeling of pressure in the throat and chest.

Please note: Depression has many causes and can affect anyone. No one is to blame for the illness, neither you nor the person affected. Depression is not an expression of incapacity or unwillingness either. From the outside, it may look quite easy to fight this condition. For the person affected, however, it can be very exhausting to try and do even the simplest things and to cope with normal everyday life.

What may help people with depression

- It may help if you show understanding for the situation and feelings of a person suffering from depression. You should take them and their illness seriously without overdramatising. At the same time, you should try to get the message across that help is possible and that they will feel better at some point in the future.
- You can encourage the person with depression to seek professional help – just as you would for any other illness.



- Many depressed people are afraid of being considered “crazy” and of being rejected or laughed at by those around them. You should make it clear that these fears are unfounded.
- Perhaps you could see yourself as a “companion during this difficult time”. It helps if you support the person concerned: start with simple activities, such as going for a walk or listening to music together. Chatting may help, too. If possible, agree a specific time and pick the person up at home.
- It may help if you keep an eye on their treatment, such as taking prescribed medications regularly, or visits to the doctor – but without giving them the feeling that you are taking control.
- Depressed people may turn down help. This is not directed at you personally but is symptomatic of their illness. They are not always in a position to take on board your suggestions. If you accept this without taking offence, you will help them a great deal.
- Under no circumstances should you try to explain their illness to a depressed person, downplay it or give well-intentioned advice. This will give them the impression you don't accept them even if this is not at all your intention.

At a glance



- Family members and friends can provide major support for people with depression.
- Dealing with a depressed person can make family members despair. Find out about depression, so you can better relate to the behaviour of the person affected by this illness. Helpful information can be accessed here: www.patienten-information.de/depression.
- Seek advice and support, for example in self-help groups for family members, from socio-psychiatric services or psychosocial contact and counselling centres.



Help with mental crises

Sometimes, a person suffering from depression thinks their situation is so hopeless that they simply don't want to go on living. They want to end their life. This is stressful for their family members and friends. It may help to remind yourself that you are not responsible.

There is no simple remedy for such a situation. But, you can still do something: You can talk about and not avoid the subject and accept the other person even when they are in a state of deep despair. Just listen without attempting to jump in right away. Have the confidence to ask pertinent questions but don't try to talk them out of their thoughts. It is useful if you explain that help is available and stress how important professional support is right now. Perhaps you can reflect together on the people or things that are so important to them that they give meaning to their (continued) life. There may be more or less clear signs of such a crisis situation. At times, people may hint that they want to harm themselves. It is rarer for family members to notice any concrete plans.

If you think you see impending danger, you should:

- listen and take the situation seriously
- keep the conversation going
- call the emergency number **112** or the police **110**
- stay with the person until help arrives
- remove any dangerous objects

If there is a risk of a person harming themselves or others, hospitalisation may be required – even against the will of the person concerned if necessary. To decide on this is the responsibility of the police.

What you can do for yourself

Depression is a burden not just for the person concerned but also for partners, family members and friends. That is why family and friends sometimes need help or time out, too.

- You can relieve the strain on yourself, too, by encouraging the person concerned to seek professional help. In some situations it may be helpful to attend therapy sessions together, for example family or couples counselling.
- Find out about the illness and its effects. When you are well informed about depression, you are better able to understand and support the person with this condition.
- Coping with a depressed individual may lead to you sometimes missing out on things you enjoy such as sport or cultural events. You may think it's selfish to enjoy yourself when someone else is suffering. But it doesn't help the ill person if you don't look after yourself. You may end up losing the energy to be there for other people.
- To help you face up to this challenge, you, too, can seek help, for instance psychotherapeutic support. Anything that relieves the strain on you will help the person you are looking after, too.
- You can also contact a self-help group. There are special programmes for family members.

More information



I. Sources, methodology and links

This information is based on the latest scientific findings from the National Disease Management Guideline on Unipolar Depression. The Programme for National Treatment Guidelines is funded by the German Medical Association (BÄK), the Association of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians (KBV) and Association of the Scientific Medical Societies (AWMF).

Methodology and sources:

→ www.patienten-information.de/kurzinformationen/depression-ratgeber-fuer-angehoerige#methodik

Further information on the subject of depression

→ www.patienten-information.de/uebersicht/depression

II. Contact to self-help groups

You can find out from NAKOS (national contact and information office for the encouragement and support of self-help groups) where there is a self-help group in your area:

→ www.nakos.de, Tel.: 030 3101 8960



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