

For Family and Friends

Reactions and Adjustments

WHEN A PERSON is first diagnosed with a depression, reactions from family members are many and varied.

- Most feel relieved that the problem has finally been identified and given a name.
- Many feel guilty, attributing something they have done (or not done) to causing the illness.
- Most are fearful, wondering what the future will hold.
- Many feel sadness as they realize that some of their hopes and expectations might not be realized.
- Some feel embarrassed that a member of their family has been diagnosed with depression.
- Some begin to understand that serious marital and family problems may contribute to the depression and need to be addressed.

All of the above reactions are legitimate and normal. As time goes on, people begin to adapt to a family member's or friend's depression by reacting in various ways including:

- denying the problem, believing that it is not serious and will go away or take care of itself;

- becoming highly involved in the depressed person's life, and making the condition the focus of their lives;
- becoming distant, moving away physically and emotionally from the depressed person;
- becoming depressed themselves as they grieve the loss of a healthy child, spouse, parent or friend;
- accepting the depression by making adjustments and developing coping skills;
- seeing the person's depression as a reaction to a stage-of-life problem; or
- viewing the depression as a challenge, something to overcome or a way to grow.

Reactions of Children

Children in particular may not understand their parent's depression and may wonder if it's their fault. Common reactions of children with a depressed parent include:

- trying excessively to please the depressed parent;
- wanting to protect one parent from the other's criticism or abuse;
- being an overachiever at school;
- misbehaving at home or at school;
- being very loyal and protective of their family;

☛ *"For the longest time, I thought I was the one to blame. My wife's belief that her laziness and self-pity had contributed to her depression seemed a viable solution. After battling a bout of depression myself, I soon learned that these were my misconceptions. I also found that advice given is often best suited for the giver, not the receiver."*

☛ *"When my husband first became depressed, I had to double my efforts at providing support. We worked together to solve some personal and family problems and this really helped. We both learned some new and effective coping strategies."*

- ☛ becoming anxious or depressed themselves;
- ☛ seeking love and attention from others outside of the home; or
- ☛ doing things to help their parent get better.

It is important to understand that children are very good at bouncing back from stressful experiences. With your support, they can adapt to your depression.

What can you do?

- ☛ Explain that your mood changes or "blue periods" are not their fault.
- ☛ Reassure them that you are not going to die.
- ☛ Tell them that you need some time to recover.
- ☛ Let them know through your words and actions that you love them.
- ☛ Ask family and friends for support and help.

By openly discussing your depression and encouraging questions, you can protect and may actually enhance the relationship with your children.

What to Expect When Depression Appears

DEPRESSION AROUSES A range of feelings in others: sadness, concern, fear, helplessness, anxiety, guilt, frustration and anger. The first depressive episode can be confusing for family members because they may not understand what is happening.

It is natural for people to try to determine the cause of the depression. Some may attribute the depression to a "bad" attitude, laziness, self-pity or irresponsibility. Others may see it as "growing pains," a normal part of maturation, the result of working too hard or studying too much. Often people feel guilty, thinking they have played a role in the depression either through something they have done or failed to do.

It is natural to want to solve "the problem." Family members may give advice and become frustrated or annoyed when it isn't taken. But the lack of energy that accompanies depression is a major barrier to taking action of any kind.

What To Do

The following guidelines may help you cope when someone close to you is depressed.

- ☛ Limit stimulation, keep surroundings as calm and relaxing as possible.
- ☛ Make your expectations clear.

✧ *"One of the things I found useful when I was depressed was to ask people around me to write a list of my positive qualities. At the time I couldn't have thought up one on my own. It sure helped. And any time I need to, I can see that someone cares. It's right there on paper."*

✧ *"I can no longer be his mother. It's better that we be two adults trying to solve the problem."*

- ✧ Be supportive and understanding. A depressed person may need to have someone to talk with who will not be critical.
- ✧ Encourage self-care especially with respect to eating, bathing and personal hygiene. For example, prepare balanced meals that can be easily reheated, keep nutritious snacks available, suggest a relaxing bath.
- ✧ Try to enhance self-esteem and self-confidence by emphasizing the positive and talking about the person's past and current achievements.
- ✧ Promote not "getting depressed over being depressed." Provide reassurance that the depression will pass.
- ✧ Monitor all medications carefully. It is common for a depressed person to forget or become confused about medications.
- ✧ Watch for evidence of hoarding medications. It is often a sign that suicide is planned.
- ✧ Determine whether there are thoughts of, or any plans for, suicide. Take action if necessary. For more information on dealing with suicidal thoughts and feelings, see the Suicide Prevention section of this handbook.
- ✧ Ask the depressed person if you are doing anything that may be contributing to their condition. Be prepared to do some problem-solving.

- ✧ Don't tell (or expect) a depressed person to "snap out of it." They may need time and support to deal with their depression.
- ✧ Above all, get professional help.

How to Help

SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT—whether it be from family members or close friends—provides a stable foundation for growth and development. We all want to feel there are people who accept and care about us. We lead healthier and more independent lives when we feel people are understanding and that our efforts are acknowledged.

Ask yourself, "How would I like to be treated in this situation?" and act accordingly. Several suggestions are provided below.

- ✧ **Treat the depressed person as an adult**
Too often, people with depression are treated as children, "talked down to," patronized or given unsolicited advice. Be tactful and respectful. Often family members must put their roles aside to provide the best support.
- ✧ **Emphasize the positive**
Focus on accomplishments with statements like, "You're looking especially smashing today," or "I really appreciated the way you handled the kids last night." You'll help to build confidence and self-esteem.

This guideline is particularly important during a depressive episode.

The negative thinking associated with depression results in a great deal of self-criticism and blame. Avoid adding your own negative comments. Downplay the person's shortcomings and failures.

distress. But there is hope for recovery. People with depression can have satisfying and productive lives. Many say they value the insight and sensitivity they have gained from their experience.

➤ **Acknowledge effort**

Even when results are not apparent, recognize attempts. Statements such as "Nice try!" or "I know one of these times you're going to get it," help alleviate discouragement.

➤ **Recognize that stigma exists**

The stigma of depression extends to families. Accepting that stigma exists and is the result of fear and ignorance helps families live with this condition.

➤ **Use humour**

Laughing together can help relieve tension, put things in a better perspective and demonstrate warmth, caring and mutual understanding. But don't use humour as sarcasm or a put-down.

➤ **State clear expectations**

Many problems can be avoided if you are clear and precise about what you expect the depressed person to do.

➤ **Deal with problems sooner rather than later**

Conflicts are easier to resolve when they first appear. When left too long, little problems turn into big ones.

➤ **Offer help judiciously**

If a problem doesn't involve you, don't be too quick with solutions. People with depression are more likely to develop confidence and independence when you acknowledge their feelings and express your belief that they can resolve issues themselves.

➤ **Don't lose hope**

Living with depression can be discouraging, particularly when relapses occur or in times of