

Folks

A PILLPACK MAGAZINE

MENTAL HEALTH

What To Do When Your Teenager Has Depression

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I was a teenager with depression. Here's what parents need to know.

Patti Woods — May 14

DEPRESSION



The memory of my first depressive episode is as real today as it was then.



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As we were getting ready to close for the night, I started vacuuming, a task I'd done every Friday for the past two years. But this evening was different. Simply pushing the vacuum was taking all my energy and I found myself sobbing as I did it. I had no idea what was happening, just that I felt like a great, black blanket was smothering me. Struggling through the rest of my tasks, I finished my shift, then went home and fell into bed. The feeling would stick with me in the weeks to come, and I had no idea how to even give voice to what I was experiencing. I couldn't stop crying. Nothing held any value or interest. Even the smallest daily tasks seemed overwhelming. My initial reaction was to hide it, pushing myself to get to work and counting down the hours until I could crawl back into bed, but eventually I approached my mother in tears and said, "I think I'm depressed."

Now 48 years old with a child of my own, I can't imagine how upsetting it must have been for my parents to suddenly see their

happy-go-lucky teen fall into a pit of darkness and lethargy. As a volunteer with the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) Family-to-Family program, I've met dozens of parents who feel helpless as they witness their children struggling to deal with their own mental challenges. It's frightening and puzzling to watch anyone struggle with debilitating depression. When it's your own child, the sense of urgency for answers and resolution only adds more tension and anxiety. Without blood tests or X-rays to help give a diagnosis, the process is slow. Medications have certainly come a long way, but the trial and error involved can be frustrating and takes valuable time. So what's a parent to do in these situations?

Obviously professional help is the first course of action. Finding the right psychiatrist and therapist is key. But let's face it: it's human nature to just want to "fix" things when they go bad. These good intentions can often lead to behaviors that aren't very helpful: nagging, criticizing

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and expressing frustration and anger. What's important to note is that, when someone is experiencing depression, they aren't choosing to feel that way. The bleakness and hopelessness is so overwhelming that it feels impossible to do anything. No amount of gratitude can change that. While there is no quick fix, however, there are small courses of action that caregivers can utilize to help make a difference.

My mother, despite having no previous experience with depression, somehow intuitively knew things to help me. In talking with others who live with chronic depression, I've found that they, too, have found certain tools and tactics to be helpful.

Small doses of exercise

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Numerous studies have shown the beneficial effects of exercise on depression. To be crystal clear, there is no way I—or anyone else in the midst of a severe depressive episode—could take part in a spinning class or go to Crossfit. The mental stress and physical exhaustion would just make that impossible. But tiny bouts of movement can actually make a difference.

“Let’s go for a walk,” my mother would say.

And I’d respond “No.”

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But then she’d say,

“Come on, some fresh air will do you good. Just a short walk.” And so she’d cajole me off the couch and we’d walk—very slowly—around the block. It wasn’t far, maybe $\frac{1}{4}$ of a mile at most. She’d point out a flower popping up or a decoration on someone’s lawn. Nothing of importance and yet, there was something

Don’t expect your loved one to immediately go out and start training for a 5k, but encouraging a short walk can truly be helpful.



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to the casualness of those walks that lifted the gloom just a tiny bit. The fresh air probably was good for me, and getting out and letting my focus shift a bit certainly helped.

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One study from 2017

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expect your loved one to
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[<https://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/doi/10.1176/appi.ajp.2017.1611122>], published in the American Journal of Psychiatry, concluded that, “... exercise may have important public mental health benefits and prevent a substantial number of new cases of depression.” Don’t expect your loved one to immediately go out and start training for a 5k, but encouraging a short walk can truly be helpful.

Mindfulness

Call it what you will: meditation, prayer, chanting, mindfulness. However you refer to it, there are studies that show that actively clearing your mind

[<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2018/04/harvard-researchers-study-how-mindfulness-may-change-the-brain-in->

depressed-patients/1. can play a part in lifting the darkness of depression.

In my case, my mother brought me to church. Again, she had to persuade me to go with her, and at the time my own religious path didn't include going to Catholic mass. But I went and we'd sit in the stillness, eyes focused on the altar. Having grown up going to church every Sunday, I knew the ins and outs of all the rituals so there was comfort in knowing what to expect and what to do. The music was soothing and, sitting amongst other people who are all there for their own stillness created a sense of community.

This type of gentle mindfulness can be achieved in other places, not necessarily a church or other house of worship. Sitting outside at the beach or in a forest; going to a calming yoga nidra class; listening to a guided meditation app ... they all serve the same purpose of helping your mind calm down.

Small tasks

A depressive episode can feel like your whole world has come to an abrupt halt. Everyday tasks that in the past were no big deal—taking a shower, making a phone call, returning a library book—can feel overwhelming. There have been times in my life when the thought of emptying the dishwasher or putting gas in the car has seemed too monumental to handle. It can be frustrating for caregivers, and the inclination can be to tell your loved one to snap out of it and just get a job or go to school.

This is where patience can be a parent's best ally. My mother would calmly give me small things to do (we're talking small!), like mailing a letter or watering the plants. The result was a feeling that I'd accomplished something that day, and slowly, I was able to manage more and more tasks. The key was that there was never any pushing to get things done, no yelling and no criticism.

Food for thought

Very often, depression comes with the side effect of loss of appetite. It can

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be a vicious cycle: you don't eat because you're depressed and because you don't eat, you don't have any energy which makes the depression worse. During times of a depressive episode, it would naturally be helpful to eat a healthy diet, (studies show that a Mediterranean-type diet is associated with low risk of depression [<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S01650327173071>]), but the simple act of making a salad can be too much to bear. Therefore, when you do eat, it's easy to turn to quick hits of junk food. A vicious cycle.

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My mother doesn't like to cook, but what I remember about my worst times is that she'd offer me little bites of things throughout the day— a sliced apple or some rolled-up ham and cheese. Even as an adult, I remember one friend making me some toast and a cup of tea during one particularly bad bout and it was just enough for me to handle. Eating as

As a caregiver for someone suffering from depression, it can be frightening and frustrating trying to manage the situation.



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nutritionally sound
as possible is
important to help
build up reserves of
physical strength and
will make things
easier when the
depression does
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As a caregiver for
someone suffering
from depression, it
can be frightening
and frustrating trying
to manage the situation. While professional medical help is
important, there are other small things that ultimately can make a
huge difference. It can be easy to criticize someone's actions (or
lack thereof) when they're suffering from a mental situation, but
patience and compassion—and a walk or a piece of toast— can go a
long way in helping your loved one navigate their way back to a
productive, inspired life.

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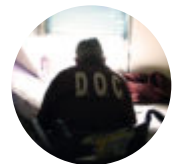
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