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How to Support a Loved One Struggling With Depression

If a loved one has been diagnosed with depression, sought treatment and needs support, it's important to understand your role. That role is mainly to listen.

By Amy Jamieson | May 15, 2025 | Mental Health and Well-Being

Sometimes I sound like a broken record.

"Baby steps."
"One step at a time."
"Just do one thing today: shower."
"What have you done to help yourself today?"

If a loved one has been diagnosed with depression, sought treatment and needs support, it's important to understand your role. That role is mainly to listen. | Credit: Getty

These are things I say to my brother when I call him — and I'm not going to lie, I'm sick and tired of hearing myself say them. My brother suffers from clinical severe depression and lives hundreds of miles away from me.

I try to help him get back on track via regular phone calls but often hang up with my head in my hands. I know that what he's going through is really hard — but from my perspective supporting him has become extremely difficult also.

It's clearer to me than ever before that depression not only impacts the one who is suffering but also those who offer support. In fact, one study found that depression was the most prevalent psychiatric diagnosis in caregivers of patients with depression. I'm not depressed but I definitely have a tendency to absorb what he's feeling.

With United States depression rates reaching new highs in recent years, caregivers and supportive family members should know there are actionable strategies from experts — none of whom have treated my brother or know his particular situation — for supporting someone who suffers from depression. Included in these strategies are working to better understand their disease, changing the way you offer support, boundary setting and more.

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Understanding Depression

The Mayo Clinic characterizes depression as a mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest, among other things. It

impacts how a person behaves and makes it difficult for them to do everyday activities.

When you're struggling with a mental illness, especially if it's chronic, motivation is often extremely challenging, says Diane McIntosh, M.D., psychiatrist, educator and author of the book "This Is Depression: A Comprehensive, Compassionate Guide for Anyone Who Wants to Understand Depression."

"We, as loved ones or care providers, might interpret their actions (or lack of action) as willful, and certainly it can feel frustrating. However, in my experience, it's important to ensure the person has the right diagnosis and is appropriately treated before coming to that conclusion," she explains.

Recovery from depression is typically multifaceted, usually involving psychotherapy, medication or both. Psychiatrists are doctors who prescribe medications and diagnose psychiatric conditions, according to the Anxiety & Depression Society of America. Therapists focus on psychotherapy, while psychologists often specialize in diagnostic testing, therapy and counseling.

If a loved one has been diagnosed with depression, sought treatment and needs support, it's important to understand your role. That role is mainly to listen. Be a presence, one "who's listening without judging or being critical," says Susan Noonan, M.D., a physician, certified peer specialist, mental health and wellness coach and author of "Helping Others with Depression: Words to Say, Things to Do."

> **As a support person you are not the one to cure or fix a chronic illness.**

Validate what your loved one is feeling because, according to Harvard Medical School, it establishes trust and helps the person feel supported and more open to discussing solutions. Explain that you understand what they're going through even if you haven't

experienced it. "I haven't been through this myself but I'm going through it with you," Noonan suggests.

Professionals, she notes, should be the ones to bear the brunt of your loved one's emotional unloading. As a support person you are not the one to cure or fix a chronic illness, says Sarah Cormell, a licensed clinical social worker in psychiatry and psychology. She suggests coming into a conversation with a loved one with a curious mind, one that's open to understanding how they are feeling with no assumptions. "We want to allow space for that mutual respect of that other one who is actually going through this thing, to just say, 'Oh, I'm so glad I called. What's going on?' [Be] very open and allowing that person that space to be able to share," she says.

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Reframing Suggestions

It can be hard to maintain positivity when negativity is coming your way; I know this from experience. If you've been supporting a person with mental illness for years, you've repeated words of encouragement or support like I have. It's not uncommon for anyone to tune people's words out, especially when they've heard them frequently.

Experts say it can help to reframe your support. I'm guilty of *telling* my brother there are things he should do to help with what he's feeling. Noonan says that instead of repeating directives like, "You *need* to do this to help yourself," it can help to rephrase that to "There's *a need* out there that *you* can fulfill." If you're trying to help your loved one find purpose by suggesting they volunteer, instead of saying, "You need to volunteer at a soup kitchen," turn that around and say, "That soup kitchen could really use your help." Those words convey that there's a need out there that they can fulfill rather than something they need to do.

> **Trying different tactics in your language may resonate. "If you say it in a different way, you put a different spin on it, that might spark a little light."**

A greater purpose in life is associated with a lower level of depression and anxiety, one study found. The tips you suggest to find purpose or to counteract persistent feelings of sadness — like volunteering, establishing a routine, participating in exercises like yoga or practicing mindfulness — may be overwhelming.

"You could say something like, 'Gee, what is it about your day you don't like? What would you like to be doing?' and then say, 'Well, how could you go about doing that?' Instead of using the word 'purpose' or 'structure' or 'interacting with people' rephrase it and put that spin on it," Noonan says.

If your supportive suggestions aren't well received, try offering alternatives or asking them to consider some sliver of that suggestion. "I hear you, I can understand, but are there parts of it that might be helpful? And if it's not yoga, is there something else that would be useful?" Noonan says. Trying different tactics in your language may resonate, she notes, "if you say it in a different way, you put a different spin on it, that might spark a little light."

Setting Boundaries

There may be times that you, the caregiver, just hit a wall and there are no more words to say or suggestions to make — I've been there. As long as your loved one isn't in a crisis situation — vocalizing suicidal thoughts or talking about hurting themselves or others along with other signs — it's OK to set boundaries to preserve your own well-being. "You have to take care of yourself," Noonan says. "You don't have to pick up the phone every time."

Your own self care should be a priority, Noonan says, because that will sustain you and maintain your healthy mental state. Make sure your routine and your family's is protected and not disrupted by the support you are giving others. Caregiver burnout is a real thing. Keep in mind, Noonan says, that you are not a faucet that can be turned on and off on a whim.

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If there's a constant rehashing of certain topics, memories, regrets or negativity, try saying, "'Well, we've talked about that before so let's not spend time today on that,'" or note that, "'This is not a helpful train of thought in our conversation," Noonan notes.

In certain instances tough love can be effective. You can try setting expectations — like a seemingly small goal of eating three meals a day, for example, to establish a routine — and be firm about the outcome. "I expect that of you," Noonan suggests saying, "and you will need to meet those expectations if we're going to continue in our conversations."

McIntosh suggests identifying major areas of frustration that you have when supporting your loved one and considering how those might change to make them more tolerable. "For instance, 'I know you're trying, but I'm finding

myself losing patience and I don't want to do that,'" she suggests. "'I think we should limit our calls to x times a week and when we talk, only x minutes can be focused on your depression. That way, we can spend time [talking] about other, more constructive things.'"

Compassionate Encouragement

It is normal to feel defeated when nothing is changing for your loved one. "I hear many times with caregivers, 'It's like, ugh, I feel like I'm doing everything and they're not really getting better and they're not really doing what they're supposed to do.' That's not uncommon," Cormell says.

It can help to have your own support system. "Having your own therapist to help you understand your own thoughts and feelings and kind of organize that before you have interactions is going to make empathy and compassion a little more accessible to you," Cormell says.

Additionally, the National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI) offers online and in-person support designed for adult loved ones of people with mental health conditions. "They're helping give each unique role the support that they need," Cormell says. "Something like that can be helpful."

> **You likely know your loved one better than anyone else, so use that to help them identify a future path, job or accomplishment.**

Doing your homework to better understand your loved one's chronic illness can foster empathy and compassion also. "Understanding the diagnosis, prognosis, to educate yourself so you understand some of the barriers," Cormell says. She also suggests devising a care plan — whether it's about who is calling or coming over when, or needs and goals for recovery — so that everyone involved is on the same page. "We want it to go smoothly, we want the

opportunities for conflict to diminish. It also gives us something to refer back to," she says.

You likely know your loved one better than anyone else, so use that to help them identify a future path, job or accomplishment. Try emphasizing, Noonan says, that "you're not happy with life the way things are and what is it that you want to do? How is it that you would like your life to be different?"

Encourage the person to verbalize goals or write them down and try highlighting skills they have to offer others. If "I can't do anything for anybody, I don't have anything to offer," is the response, Noonan suggests pointing out successes they've had in the past and use that as evidence.

> **It's important to reinforce your love and concern for that person and that you want them to have a life that's enjoyable as they define it.**

It's important, she says, to reinforce your love and concern for that person and that you want them to have a life that's enjoyable as they define it. Say, "What is it that would make you happy?" and ask for specifics, Noonan notes, not generalities like just feeling better because the ultimate goal is overall well-being.

She explains that, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, well-being includes things like making a contribution, having a purpose, making connections with others — all of which you want for your loved one suffering from depression, to build a foundation for a more fulfilling life.

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