

Depression - Information for Families

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Depression is a serious illness marked by depressed mood (feelings of sadness or emptiness) and/or the loss of interest in (or pleasure from) nearly all activities. Symptoms may also include changes in eating habits, weight gain or loss, changes in sleep or activity patterns, decreased energy, and difficulty concentrating or making decisions. A depressed person may also have recurrent thoughts of death and may actually attempt suicide. The danger of suicide is a serious consideration in cases of severe depression. For some general thoughts on dealing with a loved one's diagnosis of a mental illness such as depression, please see our ["Mental Illness - Information for Families"](#) page. Depression is a very real illness. Generally, the depressed person cannot simply "snap out of it", and attempts to get them to do so may be equally frustrating to the depressed person and the would-be "helper". The depressed person genuinely needs additional love, support, and understanding to help them through their illness. There are many resources for combating depression, including psychiatrists and other psychotherapists, peer counseling, group therapy sessions, and hotlines. Help is always available, and low-cost assistance is there for those who need it. The possibility of suicide is a real danger of depression. Many people are surprised to learn that suicide attempts are most common when the depressed person has begun to show signs of recovery. It appears that it is when the severely depressed person begins to recover that they have the energy to act on their suicidal thoughts. It is important for family and friends to recognize that just because the depressed person has begun to show signs of improvement they are not yet "out of the woods", and are still in need of the additional love and support of their friends and family. Some severely depressed people may experience psychotic symptoms, including auditory hallucinations ("hearing voices"), visual hallucinations, or delusional thoughts. These symptoms appear real to the affected person, and should not be taken lightly. Consultation with a psychiatrist may be helpful in these cases, and the symptoms should go away with treatment. Depression has been treated with a variety of therapeutic techniques; including medication and a wide range of "talk" and evocative therapies. Recent advances and the introduction of new medications have led to an increase in the use of medication as a treatment for even mild depression. Extreme cases of depression may require hospitalization (as in the case of suicide attempts). Ongoing episodes of severe depression may respond well to residential (inpatient) therapy leading to the re-establishment of effective coping techniques, a return to independent living, and full restoration of prior levels of functioning. Effective treatment for depression is available. Contact your local mental health provider for further information.

If your family member is out of control or suicidal (danger of harm to self or others), stay calm and call 911. Do not try to handle it alone.