



# Helping someone who has a mood disorder – for family and friends

## Fact Sheet

### What this fact sheet covers:

- How to tell if someone has depression
- What to do if you are worried about a family member or close friend
- How to behave with someone who is depressed
- What to do if someone close to you is feeling suicidal
- Looking after yourself
- Key points to remember
- Where to get more information and support.

### Introduction

Someone with a depressive illness is like anyone with an illness – they require our care. You can provide better care if you are able to understand something about the illness and understand what the treatment is, why it is being given and how long the person is expected to take to recover.

### How to tell if someone has depression

Just because we know someone well does not mean we will always notice when they have changed. Big changes or sudden ones are likely to be noticed, but if someone changes slowly it is easy to miss the change. Also, even people we know well (including those close to us) will not always reveal all their thoughts and feelings. Since we cannot expect to always realise that someone is depressed, we ought not to feel guilty that we 'did not know'. The sensible approach is to be aware that depression is not uncommon and what it is.

See our fact sheet: '*Symptoms of Depression*'.

### What to do if you are worried about a family member or close friend

If you think a family member or close friend has depression or bipolar disorder, try talking to them about it in a supportive manner and either suggest that they consult their general practitioner or another mental health professional, or offer to take them to see one.

Sometimes a person suffering from a mood disorder may not want to seek help. In these circumstances, explain that you are concerned about them and why, perhaps giving particular examples of actions or behaviour that have given you concern. You could also provide them with some information - such as a book or one of our Fact Sheets - that you think might be relevant. There are many other organisations that also provide helpful pamphlets and information.

You could also offer to assist them to seek professional help. This might take the form of finding someone with whom the individual feels comfortable talking, making an appointment for them on their behalf, taking them to the appointment on the day, and, if appropriate, accompanying them during the assessment interview. This may be particularly appropriate if the person has a severe disorder such as *psychotic depression* or *mania*.



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Young people, particularly adolescents, are vulnerable to mental disorders. If you think your son or daughter is showing signs of depression or mania, find time when you can talk to him or her about it (preferably in a stress-free setting) and suggest that it might help him or her to feel better by getting some support. Suggest that they visit and talk with the family's general practitioner, a school counsellor, or, initially, a friend or relative with whom they feel comfortable.

There is a range of services (telephone counselling and websites) that are specifically designed for young people.

### How to behave with someone who is depressed

Patience, care and encouragement from others are vital to a person who is experiencing depression. Clear and effective communication within the household or family is also important, and may sometimes require partners or families attending counselling with a professional for a few sessions. Sometimes depression can provide an opportunity for family members to re-evaluate the important things in life and resolve issues such as grief or relationship difficulties.

- Avoid suggesting to the person that he or she 'pull their socks up'. This is usually counterproductive as it is likely to reinforce their feelings of failure or guilt.
- If the person is suicidal, support systems should be built up and risks reduced, although overprotection should be avoided.
- Another important part of caring is to help the treatment process. If medication is prescribed, encourage the person to persist with treatment (especially if there are side effects and they feel like ceasing it).
- Counselling or psychotherapy often results in the depressed person 'thinking over' their life and relationships. While this can be difficult for all concerned, you should not try and steer the person away from these issues.
- A resolving depression sometimes sees strong emotions released which may be hard on the carer. The first step in dealing with these fairly is to sort out which emotions really refer to the carer and which refer to other people or to the person themselves.
- Treatment has a positive time as well - when the person starts to re-engage with the good things in life and carers can have their needs met as well.

### What to do if someone close to you is feeling suicidal

If someone close to you is suicidal or unsafe, talk to them about it and encourage them to seek help. Help the person to develop an action plan, involving him or her and trusted close friends or family members, to keep him or her safe in times of emergency. Remove risks (e.g. take away guns or other dangerous weapons and hold the keys of the car if the depressed person is angry, or out of control and wanting to drive off into the night).



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### Looking after yourself

Don't forget that as a carer you, too, are likely to be under stress. Depression and hopelessness have a way of affecting the people around them. Therapy can release difficult thoughts and emotions in carers too. So part of caring is to care for yourself – prevent yourself becoming physically run down and deal with the thoughts and emotions within yourself.

### Key points to remember

- If you are worried that someone is depressed or has bipolar disorder, try talking to them about it in a supportive manner and suggest that they see a mental health professional.
- If they don't want to seek help, explain why you are concerned, and perhaps provide them with some information that may be relevant.
- Young people are particularly vulnerable to depression.
- Patience, care and encouragement from others are all vital to the person who is depressed.
- If someone close to you talks of suicide, encourage them to seek help immediately from a mental health professional.
- Depression can take a toll on carers and close family members – it's important for these people take care of themselves as well.

### Where to get more information and support

- *Association of Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill*: Provides support groups and a telephone help line. Sydney (02) 9805 1883; NSW country areas 1800 655 198. [www.arafmi.org](http://www.arafmi.org)
- *Carers' NSW*: Provides carer support kits, telephone assistance, support groups and other resources. Sydney (02) 9280 4744. [www.carersnsw.asn.au](http://www.carersnsw.asn.au)
- *Carer Respite Centres*: 1800 059 059.
- *Commonwealth Carer Resource Centre*: Access to short-term counselling for carers is available. Ring 1800 242 636.
- *Carers' Australia*: Canberra (02) 6122 9900. [www.carersaustralia.com.au](http://www.carersaustralia.com.au)
- Also see Chapter 21, 'Living with someone with depression' in *Dealing with Depression: A Common Sense Guide to Mood Disorders*, by Gordon Parker.

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