

# From Ronda's Front Porch to Yours

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## Supporting Family Members and Friends with Depression

Depression. It has a way of tricking the happiest people into thinking that life is not worth experiencing. It can zap your energy and turn activities that were once fun and enjoyable into more of a chore. It is not something that is commonly talked about by those suffering from it but it has become increasingly common in the United States and the numbers might surprise you.

According to the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, major depressive disorder affects approximately 14.8 million American adults age 18 or older annually. This is about 6.7 percent of the United States population. Depressive disorder can develop at any age but the median onset age is 32.

Depression is hard to understand unless you are experiencing it. Family members are needed to provide support and encouragement for those suffering from the mental illness. This can be confusing as it is hard to know what your loved one is experiencing. It can also be a challenge because you want to reach out to them with help but may not know how to help them.

First it is helpful to know what they may be experiencing. People struggling with depression can become fatigued from day to day activities. They may lose interest in healthy activities such as eating right, exercising and responsible parenting. They can also lose their individual sense of joy. The Mayo Clinic has provided some common warning signs and symptoms they may exhibit.

- Feelings of sadness, tearfulness, emptiness or hopelessness
- Angry outbursts, irritability or frustration over small matters
- Insomnia or sleeping too much
- Changes in appetite: either reduced appetite and weight loss or increased cravings for food with weight gain
- Anxiety, agitation or restlessness
- Slowed thinking, speaking or body movements
- Trouble thinking, concentrating, making decisions and remembering things
- Unexplained physical problems, such as back pain or headaches
- Frequent or recurrent mention of death, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts or suicide

Many people suffering from depression exhibit symptoms that are noticeable in day-to-day activities such as work, school, social activities or relationships with others. Others may feel generally miserable or unhappy without knowing why. Children and teens may show depression by being irritable or cranky rather than sad.

Sadly those suffering with depression may feel ashamed and feel they should overcome it with their own willpower. Depression seldom gets better without treatment and can get worse but with the right treatment, the person can get better.

To help a loved one that may be suffering from depression you can do the following:

- Talk to the person about what you have noticed and why you're concerned.
- Explain that depression is a medical condition, not a personal flaw or weakness. Also explain that it usually gets better with treatment.
- Suggest seeking help from a medical doctor or mental health provider, such as a licensed counselor or psychologist.
- Offer to help prepare a list of questions to discuss in an initial appointment with a doctor or mental health provider.
- Express your willingness to help by setting up appointments, going along with them and attending family therapy sessions.

Recognizing the signs and symptoms of depression and your support of your family member is critical. They need understanding, encouragement and patience. Invite them for walks, outings and other activities. If they decline, keep trying but don't force them to go.

If your loved one's illness is severe or potentially life-threatening, contact a doctor, a hospital or emergency medical services. Remember that everyone experiences depression differently. Learn how depression affects your family member or friend and learn what to do when it gets worse. You can make a difference in the life of a loved one or friend and get them the help they need to manage a disabling mental illness.

Source: Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, National Institute of Mental Health, Mayo Clinic

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