

CARE RESOURCES @ ROCK BRIDGE

WHEN ONE YOU LOVE IS IN THE DARK

Many of you are not depressed yourself, but have a loved one who is. They may be a family member, a friend, or perhaps a church member or student under your care. It's horrible to watch someone you care about suffer. Looking into their face, it's easy to feel powerless to do anything to help. Depression—and mental illness in general—feels particularly scary to many of us. We don't know where to start. Here are some practical things you can do to help those who are depressed around you.

KNOW WHAT DEPRESSION LOOKS LIKE

It's challenging to help with depression if you don't know the warning signs. Classic signs of depression are persistent sadness and hopelessness, and a loss of interest in once-pleasurable things or activities. Your loved one may cry but not know why; he may shrug off playing that game or going to that movie; she may see everything in the worst light, and have no hope that life will get better. Depression also bears physical signs (i.e. unexplained aches and pains) and cognitive signs (i.e. difficulty concentrating, indecisiveness). It often involves sleep disturbances (i.e. insomnia, oversleeping) and eating disturbances (i.e. overeating, lack of appetite). Other things to watch out for are irritability, fatigue, pervading guilt or worthlessness, and reckless behavior. If your loved one struggled with depression in the past, observe how these symptoms typically manifest in his or her life to keep an eye out for recurring episodes. *The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) is an excellent resource where you can learn more: [nami.org](https://www.nami.org)*

SUGGEST PROFESSIONAL HELP

Some people may not recognize depression for what it is. Share with them gently what you've observed and suggest they seek help to get well. Remind them that depression is an illness and not something to be ashamed of. Encourage them to see a professional, such as a licensed counselor, their primary care physician, or a mental health care provider. It's a good idea to have a list of trusted counselors or providers in your area to help someone get started—particularly if you are a pastor, youth worker, teacher, or other people-helper.

BE A COMPASSIONATE LISTENER

Calmly and compassionately listen when the person wants to talk about how they're feeling. Ask open-ended questions that give them space to share about their experience. Avoid responding immediately with advice, opinions, judgment, or dismissive comments. Instead, focus on providing a safe environment for them to share, and seek to understand how they are feeling. Keep the lines of communication open.

PROVIDE PRACTICAL SUPPORT

Depression interferes with everyday tasks and can make even the simplest of things overwhelming. If the person is in your household, create ways to help them manage day-to-day tasks and encourage their autonomy as much as they are able. If they aren't, look for ways you can offer practical support to ease this burden for the person or their family: bring a meal, offer to do laundry, provide a ride to doctor's appointments, or cover childcare during counseling sessions. Practical support can also include inviting them to do something: seeing a movie, going for a walk, or participating in a hobby they once enjoyed. It's okay if they turn you down—continue to extend invitations for them to engage in simple life-giving activities.

PRAY

Pray for God's healing—whether through the intervention of doctors and medicine or through supernatural means. Pray that they can connect with a counselor with whom they can develop a strong relationship. Pray for God's protection over them. Pray for wisdom to know the best ways to love and support them, for discernment to know when to sit in silence and when to speak, when to push them toward the next step and when to listen.

ENCOURAGE SPIRITUAL PRACTICES APPROPRIATE FOR THIS SEASON

Depression may cause a shift in a person's practice of spiritual disciplines. Help them find and engage in spiritual practices that cultivate faith, hope, and an awareness of the gospel in this season. You might suggest things like communal prayer or journaling. Remind them of the truths of the gospel—of God's unrelenting work to redeem and restore, of his never-ending grace, of our hope that he is making all things new. Point them to passages and sections of Scripture that dwell on God's presence with the brokenhearted or how he worked through the pain of people in the Bible. Praying and meditating on the lament psalms is also an excellent practice and may provide freedom and language for their prayers.

CELEBRATE LITTLE VICTORIES

Healing from depression may come in fits and starts. Be on the lookout for ways your loved one is taking initiative in their own wellness or making improvements. Encourage and celebrate these steps, no matter how small. Maybe they made it out of bed today. Maybe they're regularly taking their meds. Maybe they made it out of the house. Maybe they put into practice a coping technique from their therapist. Help them to see these little victories for what they are—and rejoice.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK ABOUT SUICIDE

Suicide is serious business. Many people are afraid to ask about it and dance around the topic, concerned that they will plant the idea in someone's mind. There is no evidence that asking directly about suicide and suicidal thoughts increases a person's risk. In fact, the opposite seems to be true. Do not be afraid to ask someone directly if they are having thoughts of self-harm or suicide. And don't be sworn to secrecy about suicidal thoughts or plans—it's important to get help for a person at risk.

Know what to do if you believe someone to be at risk of suicide. You can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline yourself at 1-800-273-8255, chat with them at [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org), or you can help the person you love call them. If you believe someone to be at risk of imminent harm, don't be afraid to call 911 or take them to the emergency room.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Caring for someone with depression is a marathon, not a sprint. It can be draining, frustrating, and exhausting, even if you deeply love the person and are committed to helping them. Burning out or threatening your own mental health will greatly limit your ability to be helpful for another person. Practice good self-care and maintain your physical, spiritual, and mental health. If the person who is struggling is particularly close to you, such as your spouse or a child, you may want to seek counseling for yourself to process what you're going through.

Caring for someone with a mental illness should be a team effort, not something you do alone. Make sure there are other support systems and individuals in place for the person you're caring for so that you can have the freedom to take a step back to regroup or refresh yourself.

KEEP SHOWING UP

Walking with someone through depression is often a long process. It therefore requires patience and perseverance. It can be easy to give up or pull back when healing becomes a journey and not an instant fix. But keep showing up. Keep checking in to see how the person is doing. Keep inviting them to do things. Keep sitting with them until the light returns. Your repeated loving support is an important part of the healing process.

(Adapted from "Companions in the Darkness", by Diana Gruver)