



Beyond the Blues: Coping with Caregiver Depression

Are you a caregiver that is carrying the heavy weight of depression? You may have spent so much time and energy focusing on caring for your loved one that you haven't even considered how you are feeling. This presentation hopes to provide you with the opportunity to explore your own wellbeing. We hope to help you notice symptoms of depression and the consequences of not caring for these symptoms if they arise in you.

Many family caregivers live with the added burden of depressive symptoms. Studies report as many as one third of family caregivers who care for a family member with Alzheimer's Disease may meet the criteria for a diagnosis of Major Depression, highlighting the particular burden that comes with caring for people with this illness. Caregivers may suffer silently and may be potentially unaware of the powerful and negative effects of depression. Symptoms of depression not only negatively affect mental and emotional wellbeing, but they can also have serious negative effects on physical health as well. Depression is serious business.

In this presentation we will review what depression is. We will outline the symptoms of depression, as well as identify some of the risk factors and potential causes of depression. We hope to provide you with knowledge of the risks and ability to identify symptoms to determine if you may be experiencing depression. A number of strategies will be offered to help those struggling with depression move beyond the blues.

Attention to yourself is a critical factor in addressing this risk. While you are caregiving for your loved one it is so important to also pay attention to yourself and how you are feeling. This is not an easy balance as you face many demands in your role as a caregiver. If you do not pay attention to properly caring for yourself, you are at higher risk of mental, emotional, and physical consequences. Studies have shown that caregivers are at greater risk not only for depression or other mental health disorders, but also suffer higher rates of chronic medical conditions. Mental, emotional, and physical consequences are not only the result of stresses and strains associated with caregiving, but they can also be a result of self-neglect and not paying attention to yourself.

Not caring for yourself can look many different ways for different people. It may look like: not attending doctor's appointments, not taking medication as prescribed, not



getting enough sleep, or not allowing time for self-care. Not doing these things can cause both your mental and physical health to suffer. Caregiving can add additional stresses and strains to everyday life and cause people to neglect themselves. It is important to find time to make yourself a priority to avoid this. Caregivers deserve the same attention and care they generously provide to loved ones.

Let's begin with exploring what exactly depression is. Intermittent sadness is a normal part of life, so how do you determine when you have crossed into clinical depression? While feeling sad, moody, or frustrated for short periods of time is a normal part of life, depression on the other hand is a physical illness with certain symptoms that occur consistently for at least a two-week period of time. If left untreated, a depressive episode can last months or even years. Depression impacts your mood, thinking, and can also contribute to changes in your physical body.

Depression is an illness, not a reflection of character. It is no different than having high blood pressure or any other physical illness other than the fact that mental health conditions are often unseen. Unfortunately, there is still stigma and misinformation associated with having a mental health condition.

Let's identify some of the symptoms someone with depression may experience. A person who experiences depression often feels depressed most of the day, nearly every day. There will often be a lack of interest in activities that the person once enjoyed, and it can be hard to find pleasure in different things. Someone may find that they are eating more or less than normal, which can physically cause weight changes. Sometimes people have difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or they are finding they are sleeping too much. This can lead to feeling fatigued during waking hours and lacking energy, both mentally and physically. It may be difficult to think clearly and concentrate. Help is available. If you experience these symptoms, we encourage you to reach out to your primary care doctor and connect with a mental health professional. They can take the time to speak with you and assess your symptoms to ensure you receive the appropriate care. Depression can also lead to negative thoughts of worthlessness, guilt, or excessive worry. Some thoughts may be related to death and suicidal thoughts or planning. If you experience these thoughts, help is available 24 hours a day by dialing 988 to reach the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

Experiencing depression impacts both mental and physical health. It can cause changes with thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This can have negative impacts on daily functioning for anyone experiencing depression. For caregivers, this change can make it difficult to manage all that is on your plate while feeling symptoms of



depression. A loss of appetite or overeating comfort foods will both have an impact on your energy level and functioning. How will you manage if you are compelled to spend the day sleeping or buried under the covers because no amount of sleep feels like enough?

Depression can feel like you are dragging a lead weight around all day or as if your whole system has slowed down to a snail's pace. How do you keep up when you are approaching your day in slow motion? Or when the simple tasks feel overwhelming? On the other hand, sometimes during a depressive episode, individuals may experience an uncomfortable internal agitation or restlessness. They may feel unable to settle or calm themselves.

Mood changes that come with depression can be debilitating. A person may feel profoundly sad and unable to turn off the tears. Everything from the depressive vantage point can appear dark or hopeless. For some, profound sadness can feel like a heavy or aching heart. Others may experience less sadness with a depressive episode and may suffer from irritability and find themselves snapping at others. It may look like a short temper, agitation, or anger. Others may feel anxious and overwhelmed in addition to feeling depressed.

Another area that is affected by depression is thinking. Understandably, you may wonder why a mood disorder would affect your thinking. While there is no single cause for depression, one contributing factor may be chemical changes in the brain. Chemical changes create symptoms. With depressive episodes there may be difficulty with memory. A person may find themselves in the middle of a sentence and forget what they were saying, or find they are forgetting things they normally would never forget. There may be increased difficulty staying focused and keeping attention on something. Changes in thinking could result in difficulty making decisions.

Changes in thinking can also come in the form of the content of thoughts. A person may be experiencing an overwhelming number of negative thoughts. Some people become extremely focused on thinking negative things about themselves, others, or the world in general. Some people may experience rumination which is when thoughts are repeatedly stuck and focused on something negative over and over again. Oftentimes these ruminating thoughts can have a theme about something worrisome or something a person may feel guilty about.

When depressed, a person may become more preoccupied with their physical health and more acutely aware of physical aches and pains. As a result of chemical changes in the brain, a person may actually become more acutely sensitive to pain; so,



there is more awareness of physical discomfort and pain. Furthermore, there is a wealth of evidence that shows the close relationship between depression and a correlation to developing or worsening other physical health conditions such as diabetes, immune disorders, coronary disease, and high blood pressure. Depression, if left untreated, has the potential of worsening or contributing to further negative health outcomes.

A significant life-threatening risk associated with depression is suicide. When depressed, perspective about yourself and your life can become distorted. In a depressive state, it is difficult to see yourself and your world in a balanced way. It's as if your internal lens has colored everything grey and focused only on what is negative. This alteration in perspective can have disastrous outcomes if left untreated. Suicide can be one of these outcomes.

Those with depression who experience suicidal thoughts may have a distorted perspective and believe death would be a relief. The future may seem dark, without any hope or happiness. This unforgiving hopeless thinking can bring someone to consider bringing an end to life. Sometimes, one may be so full of rage and despair that ending their life seems the only way out of the pain. This is why it becomes so critical to seek treatment, so that decisions are not made to alleviate suffering based on these distorted beliefs. The truth is that relief is possible, your life is valuable, and the future is not hopeless. Help is available and relief is possible. You can dial 988 to reach the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline 24 hours per day.

As we consider all of these profound changes and potential risks that can occur with depression, it is no wonder that a person struggling with this illness is going to have difficulty functioning normally. Depression can have a dramatic effect on relationships, functioning at home or at work, mental and physical wellbeing, as well as engagement in living. Left untreated this debilitating illness can significantly impact your life and contribute to many mental, emotional, social, and health risks.

Depression is not an enemy that you can fight off by telling yourself to snap out of it. Just like any other illness you are not to blame for having it and just like any other illness you cannot wish it away by ignoring it. The great news is that relief is available with appropriate treatment.

There is no single cause for depression. There are many factors that can contribute to the symptoms of depression. The factors that contribute to depression are the result of biological, environmental, and psychological factors. Biological factors relate to physical changes in the brain. Changes in the function of chemicals in the brain can play a role in mood changes and contribute to depression. Sometimes when the



bodies hormones are not balanced this can trigger depression. This is often the result of a medical condition such as thyroid problems, menopause, and various other conditions. Depression is also more common in people whose relatives have the condition. Additionally, traumatic and stressful life events, such as abuse, loss of a loved one, or financial hardship can contribute to depression. Certain medications, such as high blood pressure medication or sleeping pills can also contribute. Always talk to your doctor before stopping or changing any medications you are currently taking.

Sometimes people blame themselves for experiencing depression. This is not true and is unhelpful thinking. Remember, it is an illness and not something that you are to blame for. Engaging in self-blame wastes our emotional and physical energies. By redirecting that energy to recognizing depressive symptoms and seeking treatment, people can get well again.

Now that we have identified what contributes to depression and the symptoms that occur when you have it, let's explore what is needed to get well again. We will start with one of the most important aspects of getting on the road to wellness. Paying attention to yourself. It is important to pay attention to yourself and make your needs a priority. If you don't check in with yourself and pay attention to how you are feeling emotionally, mentally, or physically, chances are you are not going to notice when things are out of balance.

We know that many times caregivers struggle to pay attention and make themselves a priority until an issue becomes a crisis. How can you begin to make yourself a priority and turn some of your energy and attention back to yourself? These behaviors don't change easily and don't change unless you purposefully bring your attention to it. They also don't change unless you actively make decisions to support that change. Let's look at some of the practices and changes you may consider on the road to more self-awareness, self-care, and recovery from depression.

Learning to pay attention to yourself can be difficult when your life is busy, demanding, and time is limited. One way you can focus on your own needs is to set up small rituals, routines, or daily practices where you take a few moments to reflect on yourself. Notice how you are feeling both mentally and physically. Caregivers are incredibly busy, and it may feel like there aren't enough hours in the day to focus on themselves. Sometimes you may have to start off small. We encourage you to carve out time, even 1-5 minutes, to check in with yourself each day.

Setting up daily practices to pay attention to yourself by having some moments of relief, fun or peace, can contribute significantly to overall wellbeing. This can provide the



prevention to keep depression from worsening or from taking hold in the first place. There are any number of ways to incorporate healthy rituals into daily life that are as varied as the individual. Some examples may be pausing mindfully before your morning coffee, listening to music, or reading a few pages of a book. Routines can also be incorporated on a weekly basis. For example, evening meditation or prayer, walking, or working on a hobby. The options are endless.

Now if you are experiencing depressive symptoms there is no getting around the fact that in order to get better you are going to have to push yourself to do the very things that you don't want to do to get better. This may take drawing on inner strengths. On the one hand, you will need to push yourself to address the symptoms while also balancing this with treating yourself with kindness and compassion as you would if you were sick with the flu. You wouldn't expect the same of yourself if you were suffering from a high fever, chills, or cough. So, the same kind of care and kindness is important with what you expect of yourself if you are dealing with symptoms of depression. Sometimes you will need to be gentle with yourself and not expect so much, but you will also need to balance this with pushing yourself to engage in the behaviors that will help you move towards getting well.

What would it look like to meet this challenge of addressing depression? You can think about the ways in which depression manifests itself and the vulnerabilities that contributed it. First, as mentioned, you will need to pay attention to yourself and consider where you stand with the symptoms that we have described. You may also want to reflect on the potential risk factors that you may have. Does it run in your family? Have you experienced a loss, trauma, or significant stress? Do you have medical conditions or medications that are contributing to you becoming depressed?

As previously mentioned, one contributing factor to depression is chemical changes in the brain. There is no test you can take to know if they are out of balance. What are your treatment options? This is where medications called anti-depressants may come in. Anti-depressant medications can be one tool in your toolbox to help with balancing brain chemicals. Antidepressants can diminish depressive symptoms and help you get back on the road to recovery. This is just one tool that you can explore as a possible option for relief. Reach out to your primary doctor or other medical professional and talk with them about the symptoms that you are having. They will help you determine if this option is something that makes sense for you.

One theory is that depression is anger turned inward or not outwardly expressed. One important consideration this theory may be pointing to is how you have taken care



of how you feel. Do you stuff your feelings when you are angry, sad, or frustrated? Do you deny your needs, attention, validation, or nurturing? If so, this could make you more vulnerable to depressive symptoms. Learning to recognize how you feel, learning to speak up when you are upset, and learning to advocate for what you need can help you find relief.

Finding support to learn to notice and care for your feelings and needs can be a turning point in healing. Seek the compassionate listening ear of a counselor who can help you explore what is contributing to your distress can help alleviate symptoms. A supportive counselor can help you in expressing yourself openly in a safe, nonjudgmental place, helping you to turn the tides toward recovery. Seek out counseling in your community. Search out the community hospitals or mental health agencies in your community for a licensed social worker or licensed psychologists to work with you.

Seeking treatment for depression can mean many different things. It may mean seeking out a medical professional, such as a physician or psychiatrist, and considering medication management as mentioned before. Or it may mean engaging in counseling with a licensed social worker, licensed psychologist, or other licensed mental health professional. There are many different evidence-based treatments, known as EBT's, that can be used in therapy. Here, we will provide you with an overview of some of the treatments that are used most often. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Depression, or CBT-D, is a therapy specific to treating depression. This treatment helps people to identify and alter unhelpful thoughts and behaviors that can contribute to or make symptoms worse. CBT-D can help you to: develop balanced and helpful thoughts about yourself, others, and the future, spend more time engaging in pleasurable activities, and learn new skills that can help you to achieve personal goals and problem solve.

Interpersonal Therapy, or IPT, focuses on healing relationship problems that may be the cause or result of depression. IPT can help you to: identify how depression is impacting your life, form individualized goals to address areas that depression impacts that are most concerning to you, and gain new skills to help you improve your social skills and problem solve.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Depression, or ACT-D, is a therapy for depression that helps individuals to live in a way that is more closely aligned with their values, while improving relationships. ACT-D can help you to: decrease negative thoughts and feelings, increase awareness, help you to live in the present moment, and clarify your values to help achieve your goals. These are just three of the many different



therapies that can be used to manage and treat depression. The goal of these treatments is to help you to improve your quality of life and overall functioning.

An added difficulty with depression is that those experiencing it may want to shut down and isolate. This stops them from getting the support and help they need. Talking and connecting with others can provide one of the critical lifelines. Reaching out for support where it is available, whether that be family, friends, church, community supports, or a counselor, can be extremely beneficial. Relief can come by sharing moments of human connection and in expressing yourself. Encourage yourself to reach out over the phone, video, email, or face-to-face and engage in social activities as you are able. Perspective can be changed with any amount of social connection.

When considering the physical implications of depression there are a number of potential strategies to address these symptoms. If your appetite is diminished or if you are overeating unhealthy foods, you can think about making sure that you are eating regular meals and trying to incorporate balanced menus that can support your physical health. There is a wealth of research out there that suggests the strong relationship between the healthy bacteria in your gut that comes from healthy unprocessed food and the state of your mood. It may seem strange to consider, but what you eat can directly influence how you feel. Sugar and starchy comfort foods that may feel good in the moment can cause a crash in your mood and often contributes to further cravings. Eating fresh healthy food can contribute to improving the balance in your gut which can help with managing your mood and diminish your vulnerability to other diseases.

If sleep has been disrupted with depression, there are a number of strategies to help get it back on track. Here is a list of tips for getting good sleep; Follow a sleep schedule of going to sleep and getting up at the same time each day, limit any screen-time before sleep, sleep in a cool dark room. If you cannot fall asleep after 15 minutes of trying, get up and do something quiet, for example you could read and try again when tired. Other tips include avoid napping, getting outside each day, no caffeine after noon, avoid alcohol, take a hot bath, or shower an hour before bed, and get some movement or exercise earlier in the day.

Movement or any kind of exercise can help improve your sleep and improve your energy level. When feeling depressed, the last thing someone may want to do is exercise. However, pushing yourself to do a little bit can move your mood from its stuck place. When you are moving the reality is you are not stuck. Taking a walk outside and soaking in some sunlight, swimming, dancing, chair yoga, or any movement can help to offset the symptoms of being without energy. Some depressive episodes are triggered



by a lack of sunlight so while you are engaging in that movement it can be more helpful to do it outside and soak in the sun. Being outdoors in nature has been shown to have healing properties that can support lifting your mood. So, get outside!

As mentioned earlier, routines and rituals can help to care for yourself. Having a daily structure can offer support during a depressive episode when motivation and energy is at an all-time low. Keeping up with household chores may feel difficult, but with order in the house it can add to a feeling of calm. This may mean breaking down tasks into manageable steps. Plan your day and schedule activities to keep you going. It is okay to not accomplish all that you normally do when feeling well, but it is important to set some plans and give yourself credit for getting out of bed and accomplishing what you are able to do. Encourage yourself not to put off taking care of your obligations as it will only fuel guilt, worry, and stress. Also, consider what can be added to the day to look forward to and enjoy. A hobby, watching a movie, reading a book, or any self-soothing activity can bring us joy.

It is important to notice and address negative self-talk and thoughts. Depression can cause people to see everything as negative and self-critical. It is important to recognize this and work towards catching yourself when you are thinking this way to interrupt the thought. Reminding yourself it's your depression talking and challenging these thoughts can be helpful. If you notice you are having these thoughts, find a way to shift your attention to something else. This may be as small as getting up and getting a glass of water or finding an activity to distract yourself in the moment. Taking time each day to focus on what you can be grateful for and what is positive can help in reducing negative self-talk and thoughts.

Finally, remember if you are not feeling well, it is still important to treat yourself with kindness and understanding. Treat yourself with the same kindness and understanding as you would a loved one or close friend. While it is important to push yourself to engage in the things that can help you, it is also important to evaluate what is contributing to your stress and cut back just as you would if you were sick. Be gentle with yourself.

One practice that may help you not only pay attention to your thoughts, feelings and needs, but also learn to treat yourself with greater kindness and compassion is Mindfulness meditation. A daily practice of engaging in this can help you manage your stress, regulate emotions, and help to alleviate negative thoughts. Before we end, we will take a couple of minutes to slow down and reflect.



Sit upright with your feet on the floor, close your eyes if you feel comfortable, if not, pick an object to focus on, and just take a deep breath in and out.

Take another deep cleansing breath in through your nose and out.

Now simply follow the natural rhythm of your breath down into your belly and out through your nose

Pay attention to your breath.

If thoughts or feelings come to your attention just let them float by, no need to hang on to them, just turn your attention back to your breath. In and out.

Simply observe any thoughts and feelings that arise, with kindness acknowledge they are just thoughts and feelings, and bring your attention back to your breathing.

There is a kind and loving calm that is there in the belly of your breath.

Allow yourself to rest in this calm and return to it whenever you need.

Now bring your attention to the present moment.

This was just a very brief moment of Mindfulness, but you can find meditations on our VA caregiver Web site and there are many guided meditations to be found to support you in your healing. Mindfulness can help you pay greater attention to yourself and supports greater kindness and compassion for yourself and for others.

Remember depression is an illness. You can care for it by seeking help from your doctor, other medical professionals, and counselors. You can find relief in being kind and caring with yourself, speaking up and expressing your feelings and needs, and reaching out for support. Encourage yourself to move, exercise, get outside, and soak in some sunlight. Work on creating daily routines and rituals. Set some goals for the day and keep some order in your environment. Begin to challenge and interrupt your negative thoughts and seek help if thoughts turn to suicide. Help is available and relief is possible. Reach out 24 hours a day by dialing 988 to reach the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

You matter, your feelings and needs matter, your life matters! With support there is life beyond the blues. The Caregiver Support Line is just a phone call away. We are here to listen and to help you find your path forward.



VA Caregiver Support Line 1-855-260-3274