



## **Beyond the Blues: Coping with Caregiver Depression**

Are you a caregiver that is carrying the heavy weight of depression? Is your heart heavy with sadness or despair? Do you find yourself dragging yourself out of bed each day exhausted and wondering how you will muster the energy to face another day? Is there a grey cloud covering your daily outlook? You may have spent so much time and energy focusing on caring for your loved one that you haven't even considered how badly you are feeling. This presentation hopes to open your eyes to your current state of wellbeing. We hope to help you to notice symptoms of depression and the serious negative consequences of not caring for these symptoms if they arise in you.

Caregivers, you are twice as likely as the general population to suffer from depression. If your significant other or family member has Alzheimer's Disease, studies report as many as one third of you may meet the criteria for a diagnosis of Major Depression. The numbers of caregivers struggling with the added burden of depressive symptoms is staggering. Many of you caregivers are suffering silently and potentially unaware of the powerful and negative effects of depression. These symptoms of depression not only negatively affect your mental and emotional wellbeing, but they also have serious negative effects on your physical health as well. Depression is serious business.

In this presentation we will review what depression is. We will outline the symptoms that are involved in making a diagnosis of depression. We will identify some of the risk factors or potential causes. We hope to arm you with the knowledge of your risks and help you identify the symptoms to determine if you are depressed. We will offer a number of strategies you can consider moving beyond the blues.

Your attention to yourself will be a critical factor in addressing this risk. While you are paying attention to your loved one it is so important that you also pay attention to yourself and how you are feeling. This is not an easy balance to keep as the demands on you escalate. The reality is that if you don't pay attention to properly caring for yourself, you are at a higher risk of negative 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 illness. The negative mental, emotional and physical consequences are not only the result of the stresses and strains of caregiving, but they are also the result of neglect, or not paying attention to yourself.

If you are not paying attention to how you are doing or making your self-care a priority you are inviting trouble. If you are not caring for yourself by attending regular



doctors' appointments or taking your medicine as prescribed, then your health and wellbeing is going to suffer. Many of you currently suffer from both the stresses and strains of caregiving but also from self-neglect. Making yourself a priority is going to be an essential component in fighting against these negative outcomes. You deserve the same attention and care that you so generously provide to your loved one. Your overall health is really depending on your attention and care.

Let's begin with exploring what exactly depression is. Feeling sad is a normal part of life so how do you determine when you have crossed into a 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 illness episode can last months or even years. Depression is the result of changes in brain chemistry that in turn impacts your mood, thinking, as well as changes in your physical body.

Depression is an illness not a reflection of your character. Depression is not a sign of being weak any more than high blood pressure or any other physical illness would reflect your strength of character. There is still unfortunately stigma and misinformation associated with having a mental health illness despite the fact that it isn't your fault that you have it. However, you will need to take care of the illness if it does occur. You are in control. If depression takes hold of you, it will require significant strength of character to tackle it. It takes strength to recognize you are not well, to have the courage to admit this and to reach out for the help that you need.

Let's define the symptoms that you will look for if you are experiencing depressive illness. Again, these symptoms would not be something temporary but would be persistent for at least a two-week period of time. You would need to have 5 or more of the following symptoms with at least one of these two symptoms being present: number one, a depressed mood most of the day nearly every day and/or number two, a diminished interest or pleasure in almost all activities most of the day every day. Along with feeling depressed most of the time each day for two weeks or feeling that you don't get any pleasure out of what you normally would or don't find anything to interest you, you would also have at least 4 of these other following symptoms.

- Eating more or less than normal with weight loss or weight gain
- Poor sleep either being unable to fall asleep, stay asleep, or sleeping excessively
- Feeling physically agitated or physically slowed down



- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Negative thoughts of being worthless, excessive guilty or worried thoughts
- Difficulty thinking clearly or making decisions, poor concentration and memory
- Reoccurring thoughts of death, or suicidal thoughts or planning

As you can see, experiencing a depressive disorder or illness causes disruptive changes not only with your mood but also your thinking and physical wellbeing. These symptoms of illness like any other illness are naturally going to have a negative impact on your ability to function normally.

How are you going to manage all that you have on your plate when you feel exhausted or without energy? If you have lost your appetite and are losing weight without trying or gorging yourself on comfort foods, this also is going to have a major impact on your energy level and functioning. How is it going to affect your ability to function if your sleep is disrupted by being unable to fall asleep or stay asleep? 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 just slowed down to a snail's pace. How do you keep up when you are approaching your day in slow motion or when even the simplest tasks can 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.

The mood changes that come with clinical depression can be debilitating. You may feel profoundly sad and be unable to turn off the tears. Everything from the depressive vantage point can appear dark, or hopeless. The profound sadness can feel like a heavy or aching heart. Others experience less sadness with a depressive episode and may suffer from a terrible irritability and find themselves snapping at others, short tempered, agitated and angry. Feeling anxious can also be a mood disturbance that can accompany depressive episodes.

Another component that is affected by depressive illness is your thinking. Understandably you may wonder why a mood disorder would affect your thinking but remember this is an illness that causes changes in your brain chemistry. Chemical changes create symptoms. So, with depressive episodes comes difficulty with your memory. You may find yourself in the middle of a sentence and forget what you were



saying or find that you are forgetting things you normally would never forget. You may have great difficulty staying focused and keeping your attention on something. Changes in your thinking could result in you finding it incredibly difficult to make any decisions.

Changes in your thinking can also come in the form of the content of your thoughts. You may notice that you are drowning in negative thoughts. Some people become extremely focused on thinking negative things about themselves or others. Some people experience ruminating 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 you may feel guilty about.

You may also become more preoccupied with your physical health when depressed. You may be more acutely aware of physical aches and pains. As a result of changes in your brain chemistry you can actually become more acutely sensitive to pain; so, you are more aware of physical discomfort and pain. Furthermore, there is a wealth of evidence that shows the close relationship to depressive illness and the correlation to developing or worsening other physical health concerns such as diabetes, immune disorders, coronary disease, and high blood pressure. Depressive illness left untreated has the potential of worsening or contributing to further negative health outcomes.

Finally, another significant life-threatening risk associated with depressive illness is suicide. Your perspective about yourself and your life can become very distorted and extremely bleak and despairing. In a depressive state it is really 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 is one of these terrible outcomes.

With depression your perspective can be so distorted that you may begin to believe your death would be a relief. You may see the future as dark, without hope for 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.

As we consider all of these profound changes and potential risks that can occur with depressive illness it is no wonder that a person struggling with this illness is going



to be hard pressed to function normally. Depression will have a dramatic effect on your relationships, how you function at home or at work, your physical wellbeing and engagement in living. Left untreated this debilitating illness can wreak havoc with your life and contribute to many mental, emotional, social, and health risks.

This 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 you can get relief from it and there is treatment and changes that you can initiate to get well.

You may be wondering where your Depression came from. There are many factors that can contribute to the brain chemistry changes that occur with depressive illness. The factors that contribute to you getting ill with depression are the result of a combination of biological, environmental, and psychological factors.

You can be vulnerable to depression due to biological factors if you have too much or too little of a brain chemical. You may be more vulnerable to it if family members struggled with a mood disorder. Environmental factors such as experiencing a trauma or loss of a loved one, or other stressful situations can contribute to you becoming ill. There are also psychological factors or the ways in which you tend to process life events emotionally and mentally that can make you more vulnerable to depression. Finally, some physical illness and medications can also contribute to experiencing depressive illness.

Sometimes people blame themselves for experiencing depression. This is not true or helpful thinking. Remember it is an illness and not something that you are to blame for. It's a waste of energy to engage in self-blame. Use that energy to take responsibility for having depressive illness and engage in all of the activities that you can to help you 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 and that is as we noted earlier, 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 then 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 full-blown crisis. How can you begin to



make yourself a priority and turn some of your energy and attention back to yourself? These habits 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 depressive illness.

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 or daily practices where you take a few moments to reflect on yourself. Notice how you are feeling, can you take a break from the demands and enjoy a moment of solitude? Caregivers are incredibly busy often 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 1-5 minutes to check in with yourself each day. s.

Setting up daily practices to pay attention to yourself and having some moments of relief, fun or peace can contribute significantly to your overall wellbeing. This can provide the preventive medicine to keep depressive illnesses from worsening or from taking hold in the first place. There are any number of ways you can incorporate healthy rituals into your daily life that are as varied as the individual. You can make a ritual of pausing mindfully before your morning coffee, listening to music, or reading a few pages of a book. You can also incorporate rituals on a weekly basis like 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 is where we talked about drawing on your inner strength. 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 and barking cough. So, the same kind of care and kindness is important with what you expect of yourself if you are sick with 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 for you to meet this challenge of addressing a depressive illness? You can think about the ways in which depressive illness manifests itself and the vulnerabilities that you have that contributed to becoming ill. First, as we



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 vulnerabilities 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?

One of the factors that can contribute to depressive illness is an imbalance in brain chemicals. There is no test you can take to know if they are out of balance. The symptoms of the illness tell you that 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 strategy you can turn to help get your brain chemistry back to equilibrium. Antidepressants can diminish the symptoms that you are experiencing and give you a fighting chance at getting 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 healing professional and talk with them about the symptoms that you are having as see if this option is something that makes sense for you.

Some theorists have described depression as 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 or attention, validation, or nurturing? If so, this could make you more vulnerable. 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 critical turning point in healing. Seek the compassionate listening ear of a counselor who can help you explore what is contributing to your distress. A supportive counselor can help you in expressing yourself openly in a safe, nonjudgmental place and 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.

Part of what can be difficult is when you are depressed you are more apt to want to shut down and isolate from getting the very support that you need. Talking and connecting with others can provide one of the critical lifelines. You will need to push yourself to reach out for that support wherever it may be available, family, friends, clergy, or a counselor. Relief can come by sharing moments of human connection and



in honestly expressing yourself. Push yourself to reach out over the phone, email, face to face and engage in social activities as you are able. Your 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 the symptoms. As was mentioned, one way to balance the biological or physical changes in the brain is to consider talking with your doctor about an antidepressant. 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 and to this mood imbalance. 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 a depressive episode there are a number of strategies to help get it back on track. Here is a list of tips for getting good sleep; Following a sleep schedule of going to sleep and getting up at the same time, limit screen exposure an hour before sleep, sleep in a cool dark room, no TV. 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, 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.

Interestingly movement or any kind of exercise will improve your sleep and can improve your energy level. The last thing you may feel like doing is exercising when you are blue but, 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, 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 healing sunlight. Being outdoors in nature has been shown to have real healing properties that can support lifting your mood. So get outside!



We mentioned earlier how routines and rituals can help you care for yourself. Having a daily structure can support you 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. Break down tasks to manageable steps. Plan your day and schedule activities to keep you going. You may not be able to accomplish all that you normally do when feeling well but it is important to set some plans and give yourself some credit for getting out of bed and accomplishing what you are able to do. Push yourself not to put off taking care of your obligations as it will only add fuel to your guilt, worry, and stress. Also, consider what you can add to your day to look forward to and enjoy, maybe a hobby, watching a movie, or any self-soothing activities.

Notice and address your negative thoughts and remind yourself that it is your depression talking. Depression can cause you to see everything as negative and self-critical. You will need to catch yourself thinking this way and interrupt it. Remind yourself it's your depression talking and challenge these thoughts or cut out the critical self-talk in your head. Notice it and shift your attention. Take time each day to focus on what you can be grateful for and to focus on what is positive.

It is especially critical to take seriously when thoughts arise that your life doesn't matter, that others would be better off without you, that nothing will change, and the only way out is to die. These thoughts created by the illness need to be taken very seriously. Don't let these distorted beliefs caused by your illness influence you making plans or decisions to end your life. This is the depression talking and you need to reach out and get the help so that you don't inadvertently act on these thoughts when treatment can relieve your suffering and bring you back to reality. Your life does matter, the world is better off with you in it, change is always possible and there is another way out of the pain you are in.

Finally, remember you are ill and treat yourself with some kindness and understanding. While it is important to push yourself to engage in the things that can help you also may need to look at what is contributing to your stress and cut back just as you would if you were sick. Be gentle with yourself.

One of the practices 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, calm your emotions and help to quiet your thoughts. Before we end, we will just take a couple of minutes to slow down and reflect.



Sit upright with your feet on the floor, close your eyes 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 and then move 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. considering antidepressants or working with your healing professional. You can find relief in being kind and caring with yourself, speaking up and expressing your feelings and needs, and reaching out for support. Remember there needs to be a balance of lowering your expectations and cutting back on stressful demands and pushing yourself to do the things that will help you move beyond the blues. Push yourself to move, exercise, get outside and soak in some sunlight. Push yourself to have a schedule, set some goals for the day and keep some order in your environment. Challenge and interrupt your negative thoughts and seek help when those thoughts turn to suicide. Help is available and relief is possible. Reach out to others.

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