

# Depression

## Introduction

This leaflet is aimed at:

- the carers of people with depression who provide continuing help and support, without payment, to a relative, partner or friend;
- the psychiatrists, GPs and other members of the health team involved in the care and treatment of people with depression.

It suggests ways of improving communication and true partnerships between carers, health professionals and those diagnosed with the illness.

## For the carer

### About depression

Most of us feel sad and miserable at times, but when these feelings last more than a few weeks, and are so bad that they interfere with the person's everyday life, professional help is usually needed.

### Changes in the person's behaviour

As a carer you may notice that the person:

- is unhappy most of the time
- has lost confidence in themselves
- expresses feelings of guilt, shame and worthlessness
- is irritable
- is tearful
- has lost their appetite, or eats more than usual
- has changed their sleeping pattern
- is extremely tired
- has problems concentrating
- is withdrawn and has lost interest in life, including sex
- talks of suicide.

### Making a diagnosis

By talking to the person and a close relative or friend, the professional will get an understanding of recent events, personal history and family background. After considering all other possible causes of the symptoms, including physical health problems, a diagnosis of mild, moderate or severe depression may then be made.

### Treatment

Depression is an illness that can be treated successfully. Sometimes, it is triggered by life-events, or may appear suddenly with no apparent cause. Most people with depression are treated by their GP. Some may need more specialist help, involving a referral to a psychiatrist and possibly to a Community Mental Health Team (CMHT), where they could see a community psychiatric nurse (CPN), social worker, psychologist or occupational therapist. Admission to hospital is only needed for about 1 in a 100 people with depression.

### A number of treatments are available:

- talking therapies, such as counselling and psychotherapy
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) which helps the person to think about themselves and others in a different and more positive way
- medication, such as antidepressants
- self-help, including relaxation techniques and exercise
- remedies, such as St John's Wort.

### As a carer, how can you help?

- Encourage the person to talk about their feelings.

- Try to be a good listener.
- Help the person to accept that this is a treatable illness which is not their fault.
- Keep reassuring the person that they will get better.
- Encourage regular exercise and a balanced diet.
- Encourage the person to accept professional help.
- Help the person to stay away from alcohol.
- Take seriously any talk of self-harm or not wanting to live.

### As a carer, you may feel:

- impatient with the person's behaviour
- worried that you are losing the person you knew
- worried about coping and asking for help
- worried about the future, including financial concerns
- worried about the stigma associated with mental illness
- worried about the person's safety and the risk of suicide
- exhausted by listening and caring
- isolated from your usual social contacts.

Caring for someone with depression is often a very difficult, stressful and lonely role, but help and support are available.

## Tips for carers

### In partnership with your doctor and members of the health team

Good communication between the doctor, other professionals, the person with depression and their carer is very important, but takes time and effort. Both the patient and the carer should be encouraged to be fully involved in any discussions about treatment and



care plans. Forming positive relationships with all the staff involved in the person's care is of great benefit, particularly in the provision of on-going support and information.

**Questions to ask the doctor**

- Can you explain what the diagnosis means?
- What can we expect in the near future and over time?
- What treatments are available?
- Why have you chosen this particular treatment?
- How long will it take for the medication to work?
- How long will the person have to take the medication?
- Would talking therapies or CBT be helpful?
- How often should the person come to see you?
- Are there things we can do to help ourselves?
- Is it safe for the person to drive?
- Do you have any written material about depression and its treatment? If not, who does?
- Are there any organisations or local community services that may be of help?
- Who do we contact if we need help 'out of hours'?

Remember to arrange the next appointment before you leave.

Regular and well prepared visits to the doctor or other members of the mental health team will help get the best care and support for both of you.

**Advice which may help you prepare for follow up visits**

- Discuss with the person any new worries or changes in their mood, thoughts and behaviour.
- Keep a note of these changes and any reactions to medication as they occur, recording dates.

- Just before the next visit, look at the notes and decide, with the person, the most important points.
- Write down your top three concerns to make sure that you discuss these, and take the other notes with you.

Your concerns may include:

- changes in symptoms and behaviour
- side-effects of medication
- general health of the person
- your own health as a carer
- help needed
- when the person will be fit to return to normal activities, including work and driving.

**During the visit:**

- If you or the person do not understand something, ask questions until you do. Encourage the person to speak up.
- Take notes and, at the end, tell the doctor what you and the person have understood so that any misunderstanding or omission can be corrected.

**Confidentiality**

All professionals working in mental health services have a duty of confidentiality to their patients, and so can be reluctant to discuss a patient's diagnosis or treatment with the carer, unless the patient gives their consent for information to be shared. Many health professionals do recognise the value of involving carers and encourage the patient to understand the benefits of this. (See our leaflet '*Carers and confidentiality in mental health*').

**If the doctor is unwilling to involve you as a carer, there are a number of things you can do:**

- ask the person you are caring for if you can stay with them at some of their appointments, or for part of

their appointment

- talk to other members of the health team
- contact the helplines listed at the end of this leaflet
- involve local mental health advocacy workers.

**Don't forget to take care of yourself**

- Share your worries with trusted friends and family members.
- Don't struggle on alone ask for help.
- Make time for yourself and leisure activities.
- Ensure that you eat well and get plenty of exercise.
- Go and see your own doctor if you have sleep problems or are anxious or depressed.
- Ask if a family support worker is available.

**For the professional**

As a professional working with people with depression and their carers, we hope that the following is a helpful guide to good practice.

**When making an assessment, do you?**

- Try to see the patient and the carer separately, as well as together

**Do you allow yourself enough time to?**

- Listen, ask, listen
- Obtain a life history
- Ask about any bereavements, possible abuse, or other traumatic events
- Explain how you arrived at the diagnosis
- Talk about short- and long-term prognoses
- Leave time for questions and discussion

**In the management of the illness, do you?**

- Discuss all possible treatments including medical,



- psychological and self-help
- Talk about the possible side-effects of medication
- Discuss how to meet the care needs of both the patient and the carer
- Talk about positive outcomes
- Spend time asking about the carer's health – physical and emotional

**Points to remember**

- The carer may be in need of respite.
- Make it clear that you will be happy to talk to other members of the family.
- Make sure there is a professional person available whom the family can contact at any time.
- Give an 'out of hours' telephone number.
- Make sure that the patient and carer have adequate information about their care and treatment.
- Have available information about depression and its treatment.
- Tell everyone you see about relevant mental health or carer organisations.
- When you write to other health care professionals, it is good practice to send copies to the patient and the carer.

**Further help**

**Royal College of Psychiatrists**

17 Belgrave Square, London

SW1X 8PG

Tel: 0207 235 2351 ext 259 ;

[www.rcpsych.ac.uk](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk)

Produces information for the general public on common mental health problems and treatments.

**Depression Alliance**

35 Westminster Bridge Road,  
London SE1 7JB

Tel: 0845 123 23 20;

[www.depressionalliance.org](http://www.depressionalliance.org)

Provides information, support and understanding for people with

depression and relatives who want to help.

**MIND**

Granta House, 15-19 Broadway,  
London E15 4BQ

Tel: 0208 519 2122;

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

Provides information and literature covering a wide range of mental health issues.

**The Princess Royal Trust for Carers**

142 Minories, London EC3N 1LB

Tel: 0207 480 7788;

[www.carers.org.uk](http://www.carers.org.uk)

Provides information, support and advice to carers.