

HEALTH ALERT!

Understanding The Symptoms Of Depression Can Save A Life

(NAPS)—Julie Totten lost her brother to suicide. Although her family didn't know it at the time, Mark suffered from depression.

The basic emotional symptoms of depression are generally well known: hopelessness, loss of interest or pleasure in people and things and a general sadness. But many of the most obvious symptoms—or clues—are seldom associated with depression. Physical symptoms such as fatigue, aches and pains and gastrointestinal problems can signal depression just as often as sadness.

After Mark's death, Totten began researching what she knew of his behavior and symptoms during those last years of his life. She realized her brother experienced typical physical symptoms of depression—loss of appetite, fatigue and achiness. Mark's primary care doctor didn't find anything wrong and just urged Mark to take care of himself.

"I was heartbroken to learn that, had his depression been diagnosed, it could have been treated," she said. "Mark did not have to die."

Depression is widespread, affecting nearly 19 million Americans. Women in their childbearing years are twice as likely to experience depression as men. Depres-

If Someone You Know Has Depression:

- Get educated about depression
- When possible, with the patient's consent, attend medical appointments to lend support and help communicate symptoms
- Be on the lookout for changes in behavior or physical symptoms, and call the attending clinician to notify of changes
- Help keep a weekly or daily diary of symptoms and progress



sion is treatable, but only one-third of people with depression seek treatment. This undertreatment is usually due to misunderstanding of symptoms, or shame associated with the illness. Tragically, it is the leading cause of suicide, which occurs approximately every 17 minutes in this country.

These daunting statistics led Totten to wonder how many family members might be affected by depression and don't know what to do to help their loved ones.

"I had many questions when I was learning about what happened to my brother," she said. "But the help I needed as a family member wasn't available. Of the many organizations that focus on

depression, none offered information to help the families."

In 2001, Julie founded a non-profit organization called Families for Depression Awareness to address the questions millions of family members have about helping their loved ones through depression. "In these very sensitive situations, it is easier to teach and learn from others' past experiences, which is why I now share my story," she said.

According to Totten, understanding the symptoms of depression and helping a friend or loved one receive treatment can save a life. But it is not always easy.

"Supporting someone with depression can be difficult, and it is okay to acknowledge your feelings of frustration and confusion," she said. "The key is showing that you care and enlisting other people's help so you don't burn out. Never lose hope. It may take time, but your family's future can be happy and healthy."

For more depression information and brochures, visit www.familyaware.org or call 617-924-9383.

For a free brochure with depression symptoms and tips for talking to a doctor, visit www.med.umich.edu/depression or call 800-475-MICH.