

Caregiving from a Distance

When someone is struggling with depression, a family caregiver can step in to help them, even if they live in a different town, state, or country. Here are some suggestions for taking care of your loved one – and yourself!

Your wellbeing needs to come first: you can't pour from an empty cup

To counteract the stresses of caregiving, we urge you to identify and utilize strategies for self-care that work for you. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- getting regular physical exercise
- having positive social interactions
- seeing a therapist for your own support and wellbeing
- keeping a gratitude journal
- reframing your mindset
- setting realistic expectations (watch our Stages of Change videos)

Watch Our Free Webinar!

Caregiving from a Distance: How to Support Someone Who Lives with Depression

<http://familyaware.org/trainings>

- volunteering for a meaningful cause
- engaging in activities that nourish you
- reducing stress and how it impacts you, such as by practicing mindfulness (purposely focusing your attention on the present moment—and accepting it without judgment; many online resources are available).

Visit the familyaware.org website to take the FFDA Caregiver Stress Test (<http://familyaware.org/stress-test>), watch our Coping with Stress webinar (<http://familyaware.org/trainings>), and access more ideas for caregiver self-care. Commit to taking care of yourself – and follow through. You're worth it!

What to do if you are concerned that your loved one has depression

Only a mental health or medical professional can diagnose depression. Family members, however, are often the first to recognize signs that suggest the need for a professional evaluation. Look for changes in your loved one's behavior, mood, demeanor, and thinking that result in significant impairment or loss of function for your loved one. If you have concerns, keep a record of your observations of changes. Also remember: therapists can help people who are struggling, even if they don't have a diagnosable condition. If your loved one is experiencing these kinds of symptoms for two weeks or more, and is having loss of functioning or significant impairment, they should have an appointment with a clinician:

- Feeling miserable, depressed, sad, empty, or irritable most of the day, nearly every day
- Losing interest or pleasure in most activities
- Unexplained or nonspecific aches and pains
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide
- Changes in
 - sleep patterns or eating habits (too much or too little)
 - energy levels and activity (restlessness or fatigue)
 - sense of self-worth (or feeling guilty)
 - ability to concentrate or make decisions

Learn about how depression impacts Reasoning, Organization, Attention, and Memory (the "ROAM" depression symptoms) at <http://familyaware.org/more-than-mood>

Support their seeking care and self-advocacy

Because the symptoms of depression can make it challenging for your loved one to advocate for their own care, you can step in to offer support. Here are some suggestions.

- Share your observations with them in a nonjudgmental way
- Talk with them about their vision of wellness: what will they be able to do, how will they feel, what kinds of problems will they likely be able to handle
- Help them feel equipped to advocate for themselves regarding treatment goals, preferences, and priorities; have conversations that will help them clarify their thoughts and what they'd like to do
- Research treatment options and provide information; help to evaluate the credibility of sources and resolve conflicting information
- If they are taking medication, provide support around sticking to the treatment schedule, monitoring for positive and negative effects, and helping articulate the nature of the response to treatment
- Help to arrange logistical support (e.g., arrange rides to/from appointments or child care)
- Offer to help with care coordination among your loved one's providers.

Identify local resources for them

Finding prospective providers, making calls, and identifying other supports can be daunting and exhausting, especially for a person living with depression. Caregivers can help by creating a contact list of resources and supports that are local to their loved one. These might include

- mental health clinics or providers (including tele-mental health providers) who take their insurance
- resources at their job or school (e.g., how to contact EAP or counseling services)
- support groups
- nearby hospitals with a psychiatry unit
- crisis intervention units or mobile crisis teams (if available in their community)
- spiritual communities if applicable
- outlets for socializing and engagement
- relatives or family friends (or even college alumni/ae) nearby.

Communication tips

Ideally, you and your loved one will have a good relationship and the ability to communicate openly; if not, start where you are and build your communication skills. Here are some tips.

- Use active listening: focus on the person talking; listen for the sole purpose of hearing what they are saying, not to come up with your response; use your body language to show your interest and attention
- Be nonjudgmental and compassionate, convey your support and encouragement
- Discuss difficult issues before they arise, try to plan for situations, e.g., when they feel suicidal, if they are not answering your calls
- Ask in what ways they would like your help and involvement
- Only offer or agree to do what you can and will do; this helps build trust and confidence
- Remind them that you care about/love them, even when they don't want your help at that time.

Communication platforms that include video (like Skype, Zoom, and FaceTime) allow you to see your loved one rather than just hear them. This enables you to make your own visual assessment of your loved one's appearance (e.g., do they seem to have lost or gained weight, do they look like they have been sleeping, are they maintaining their personal hygiene?), adding to information you gather from listening to what they say and how they say it.

Need help getting started?

- Watch our Caregiving from a Distance webinar at <http://familyaware.org/trainings>
- Watch the how-to video and download the Family Action Plan at <http://familyaware.org/actionplan>
- If you or someone you know has been thinking about death or suicide, call 1-800-273-TALK or 9-1-1 immediately. For crisis support via text message, text LISTEN to 741741.