

DEPRESSION – GUIDE FOR FAMILY MEMBERS



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DEAR READER,

This information is intended for the family members of people suffering from depression.

It provides coping tips and suggestions on how to handle the situation. For you and your sick family member it is good to seek as much information as possible about depression.

You can find out more in the Patient Guideline and in the information leaflet "Depression" (see box overleaf).

▶ LIVING WITH A DIFFICULT SITUATION

It's nobody's fault that your family member is suffering from depression. There are many causes of the illness and it can affect anyone.

It is a strain not just on the person affected but also on the people around them – particularly close family members.

It is difficult to watch someone suffering whom you care for deeply. You would like to help but don't know how.

A number of your relative's symptoms may affect your day-to-day life together in the near future to varying degrees.

They include for example:

- low, depressed mood
- loss of interest and joie de vivre
- lack of drive and tiring easily
- reduced concentration and attentiveness
- reduced feeling of self-worth and self-esteem
- feelings of guilt and worthlessness
- exaggerated fears about the future and "a negative take on everything"
- sleep disorders
- thoughts of death or suicide
- physical disorders like loss of appetite, gastro-intestinal complaints, pain, dizziness, breathlessness, feeling of pressure in neck and chest

▶ WHAT HELPS YOUR FAMILY MEMBER

- It helps if you show understanding for your relative's situation and feelings. You should take their problems seriously, without overdramatising them.
At the same time, you should try and get him to understand that help is available and that he will feel better again in the future.
- It is very important that you support your relative's decision to seek professional help – just as you would in the case of other illnesses.
- Perhaps you could see yourself as a companion during this difficult time.
It helps when you support your family member in doing the things that do him good:
start with small activities that he enjoys doing like a walk or listening to music. Chatting helps too.
- In some cases it may help your family member if you keep an eye on his treatment, for instance the regular taking of any prescribed medication or visits to a psychotherapist – without giving him the feeling that you are taking control.
- Sometimes your family member may turn down your help. This is not directed at you personally but is part of his illness.
Someone suffering from depression is not always able to take on board your suggestions. If you accept this without taking offence, you will help him a great deal.
- Under no circumstances should you play down his illness. This will give your family member the impression that you don't accept him even if this is not at all your intention.

▶ A DIFFICULT SUBJECT: EMERGENCIES

Sometimes a person suffering from severe depression thinks his situation is so hopeless that he simply doesn't want to go on living. His illness pushes him to want to end his life. This is particularly difficult for that person's partner and family. It may help if you remind yourself that you are not responsible and cannot take any responsibility either.

There may be more or less clear signs of an emergency of this kind. Sometimes people may hint at this. In very few cases do family members realise that a person with depression is planning something. If you think your family member is at risk, you should:

- listen and take the situation seriously
- keep the lines of conversation open
- call an emergency doctor and/or the police
- not leave your family member alone until help arrives
- remove any dangerous objects

In the case of an acute risk to the patient or other people, hospitalisation may be necessary even against the will of the person concerned. The police are responsible for this.

▶ MORE INFORMATION

This Patient Information is based on the latest scientific findings and encompasses the important points from the Patient Guideline "Unipolar Depression".

Other useful links

Patient Guideline "Unipolar Depression":

www.patienten-information.de/patientenleitlinien

Self-help organizations and cooperation partners involved in the Patient Guideline:

www.patienten-information.de/patientenbeteiligung/selbsthilfe, www.azq.de/pf

Information leaflet „Just feeling sad – or depressed?": www.patinfo.org

Contact to self-help groups

You can find out from NAKOS (national contact and information office for the encouragement and support of self-help groups) where there is a self-help group in your area: www.nakos.de, Tel.: 030 3101 8960

Patient Guidelines

Patient Guidelines translate the treatment recommendations in medical guidelines into everyday language that can be understood by ordinary people. They provide important background information on the causes, examination methods and treatment of a disease. The BÄK (German Medical Association), the KBV (National Associations of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians) and the AWMF (Association of Scientific Medical Societies working group) are the co-ordinators of the programme for the development of medical guidelines ("National Medical Guidelines") and the respective patient versions.

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▶ WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Coping with a relative with depression may mean that you, yourself, have to miss out on doing many things. Things that you really enjoy like hobbies, sport, contacts, culture. You may feel it is selfish to enjoy yourself when someone else is suffering. However, you're not helping the person concerned by not looking after yourself enough. You may even end up not having the strength to look after that person.
Accept the fact that the treatment of depression takes time.
- To help you face up to this challenge, you, too, can seek assistance, for instance psychotherapeutic support.
You can also go to a self-help group. Everything that you do to reduce the pressure on yourself is good for your family member.
- By encouraging your family member to seek professional help, you are also relieving the strain on yourself. In some cases it may be helpful to attend joint therapy sessions, for instance couple of family counselling.

With the compliments of