

*A Guide for Caregivers*

# How to Talk to Your Elderly Parent About Depression







# Depression

Everyone experiences feeling unhappy or sad at some point over the course of his or her life, but someone who has persistent, ongoing sadness that lasts for more than two weeks may have depression—a serious illness that is treatable.

Depression in older adults is often dismissed as inevitable or a normal part of aging, but this is not the case; depression is a treatable medical illness. This brochure outlines the signs of depression in older adults, offers advice on how to approach an older person if you notice these signs, and provides places to go to get more information. An online resource guide is available at [www.agingresearch.org/depression-resourceguide](http://www.agingresearch.org/depression-resourceguide).



# Facts about depression and getting older

- Depression affects 15 to 20 percent of people over the age of 65.
- Depression is not a normal part of getting older.
- Many times people experiencing depression do not recognize the symptoms or seek the help necessary.
- Depression is a medical illness and not something you easily “snap out of.”
- Depression in older adults can be caused by poor health, poor sleep, a chemical imbalance, or can be triggered by long-term physical illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer, Alzheimer’s, or arthritis. Depression can also occur after loss or major life changes such as the death of a spouse.
- Even mild depression can impair coping and worsen the disability associated with other chronic illnesses.
- Depression can decrease quality of life and make diagnosis of other illnesses much more difficult. Untreated depression can also lead to suicide.
- Depression is treatable through therapy, medications, and a combination of these approaches.
- The first step to feeling better is recognizing the signs of depression.



# How do you know your older parent is suffering from depression?

Below is a list of common signs of depression from the National Institute on Aging. Not every person with depression will experience all of these symptoms, but the presence of several of these symptoms should arouse concern. If any of the following symptoms lasts for more than two weeks, you should encourage your older parent to see his or her physician or mental health professional.

- An “empty” feeling, ongoing sadness, and anxiety
- Aches and pains that don’t go away when treated
- Tiredness, lack of energy
- A hard time focusing, remembering, or making decisions
- Loss of interest or pleasure in everyday activities, including sex
- Feeling guilty, helpless, worthless, or hopeless
- Sleep problems, including trouble getting to sleep, very early morning waking, or sleeping too much
- Being irritable or angry
- Eating more or less than usual
- Thoughts of death and/or suicide
- Crying too often or too much



# Approaching the topic of depression with your parent

Each person and relationship is different and you know best how to talk to your parent. The Alliance for Aging Research has developed the following tips to help you talk to your parent about depression.

- **Be aware of differences in comprehension of and understanding about depression**

— Depression has become a more openly discussed health issue as the science related to mental health has advanced; but people hold many different opinions on the issue. You should be prepared to accept points of view that are different from your own. For example, your parent may feel that depression is just a part of getting older and not a treatable condition. He or she may feel it is something you can simply “snap out of” or that it is a personal or moral weakness. You or a physician may need to explain that depression is a medical condition for which there are effective treatment options.

- **Speak the same language**

— Part of communicating openly and effectively with the older adult on this issue is related to talking about it in a way that you are both comfortable with. Try not to overwhelm your loved one with too many questions. Use terminology and language that is familiar to your parent. It is also helpful to use analogies and examples.

- **Be supportive**

— Remember to not let your questions appear as if you are interrogating the individual. Be empathetic rather than judgmental and ask open-ended questions. Offer to spend time with your parent, suggesting activities such as taking walks, playing cards, or looking through photographs. These activities can generate conversation and offer the opportunity to talk about how they are feeling.




- **Be a good listener**

— Once you have raised the topic of depression, it is important to listen carefully to what your parent has to say about how he or she is feeling. Listen to what your parent is saying and be mindful of the symptoms of depression.

- **Recognize that this is a process**

— Many older Americans with depression may be unwilling to acknowledge that they suffer from depression. Be prepared to have many conversations about the topic and use resources — doctors, counselors, support groups — to help you and your parent through this process.





# Things you can do

If you believe that you know an older adult who is experiencing depression, here are some things you may want to do:

- Talk to the person about how he or she is feeling.
- Talk to family members and friends to see if they have noticed any signs of depression.
- Talk to your parent's physician. Be prepared to provide the physician with as much detailed information as you can about any of the signs of depression that you have noticed.
- Look for support groups for you and your parent. Some good resources include:
  - The American Self-Help Clearinghouse [www.selfhelpgroups.org](http://www.selfhelpgroups.org) has a searchable database of over 1,100 national and international model and online support groups that include groups for mental health, parenting, and caregiver concerns.
  - The Well Spouse Foundation [www.wellspouse.org](http://www.wellspouse.org) has a list of available support groups. You can contact this organization directly to find one closest to you. You can contact them by phone at (800) 838-0879.



- Children of Aging Parents National Self-Help Clearinghouse [www.caps4caregivers.org](http://www.caps4caregivers.org) keeps a current list of support groups for caregivers. Contact by phone at (212) 354-8525.
  
- Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance [www.dbsalliance.org](http://www.dbsalliance.org) has a list of groups and chapters as well as publications and programs. You can contact this organization by phone at (800) 826-3632 or (312) 642-0049.
  
- If your parent suffers from a specific disease you may want to contact the local chapter, such as the Alzheimer’s Association or the Multiple Sclerosis Society.
  
- Your local religious services agencies may have information about support groups.
  
- Call the Eldercare Locator toll-free at (800) 677-1116 or visit [www.eldercare.gov](http://www.eldercare.gov)
  
- Talk to the social service department of your hospital.
  
- Find local mental health services in the Yellow Pages under “Mental Health Services.”
  
- Ask for a mental health professional referral from your physician



● For information on mental health issues contact:

- Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance  
(800) 826-3632  
Website: [www.dbsalliance.org](http://www.dbsalliance.org)
- The National Institute of Mental Health  
(301) 443-4513, or (866) 615-6464  
Website: [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)
- The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill  
(703) 524-7600  
Website: [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)
- The National Mental Health Association  
(800) 969-NMHA (6642)  
Website: [www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org)



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