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What to Do When Depression Enters a Relationship

The pressure of being in a relationship can feel overwhelming to someone living with depression. When you're struggling with an illness that makes you tired, sad, and generally uninterested in life, often the last thing on your mind are the needs of others. Equally frustrating and emotionally draining is trying to maintain a relationship with someone who's depressed. It's hurtful and confusing when loved ones increasingly isolate themselves, pull away, and reject others' efforts to help. All of these feelings and reactions can damage relationships, whether they're with spouses, partners, children, or friends.

Each year, depression affects an estimated 19 million Americans and countless numbers of loved ones. It can test even the most secure of relationships. The good news is that depression is very treatable and by taking the appropriate steps to combat the illness, your relationship can survive.

Steps to Overcome Depression and Keep Your Relationship Healthy

- The most important step toward successful recovery is to seek treatment. With the appropriate combination of "talk" therapy and medication, people with depression can achieve remission (virtual elimination) of symptoms and reconnect with life and with relationships.

If you're experiencing symptoms of depression:

- Share your feelings with others as much as possible. Your reluctance to talk about how you feel only creates distance between you and your loved ones. It's especially important to keep the lines of communication open during trying times.
- Let your partner know that you still find him or her attractive. An affectionate touch and a few reassuring words can mean a lot, even if you don't feel inclined toward more intimate relations.
- Consider couples or family counseling. Your willingness to talk about your relationship and how it may be affected by depression speaks volumes to family members and loved ones about their importance in your life.
- Keep working toward recovery. Today's treatment options make that more realistic than ever.

- To resolve all your symptoms, a combination of medication and “talk” therapy may be recommended. Your physician will help you determine the right levels of medication and how long you should stay on them.

If you're in a relationship with someone experiencing depression:

- Remember, your role is to offer support and encourage your loved one to seek professional help. Encourage your partner not to settle for partial improvement and explain that with the right treatment, people with depression can regain their lives.
- Although you may be prepared to do anything and everything to help, don't try to take over the life of someone who is depressed. Your loved one may seem overwhelmed, incapable, or frustrated, but you can't reconstruct his or her life.
- Give advice in the form of options. For example, recommend a physician for your partner to see or suggest support groups you think may be a step toward alleviating his or her symptoms.
- Remember that depression is a real illness that should be taken seriously. Don't belittle the person by saying things such as “Snap out of it,” “Get over it” or “Everyone feels down now and then.” Try your best to understand the illness.
- Recognize that depression is not rational. It is painful to be rejected, scorned, or ignored, but this may be how your loved one responds to your efforts to help.
- Care for yourself. Carve out time to pursue your own interests and to socialize even when your partner can't join you. You might also want to consider seeking individual counseling.

Mental Health America of Franklin County is a private, not-for-profit organization, established in 1956. We help people navigate the mental health system. We are dedicated to promoting mental health in Franklin County through advocacy, education, and support services. Our programs include: information and referral to community mental health and alcohol/drug services; free support groups for people with mental illness and their families; an Ombudsman program that assists clients in navigating the mental health and alcohol/drug system; mental health screenings in English and Spanish; Pro Bono Counseling Program where underinsured and uninsured individuals can receive free counseling; community and professional mental health education including Get Connected; maternal mental health support and advocacy (POEM); and a quarterly newsletter featuring legislative updates and new happenings at MHAFC. We receive funding from the Franklin County ADAMH Board, United Way of Central Ohio, individuals, foundations, and corporations. To become a member or find out more information, please visit us online at www.mhafc.org.