

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Depression and Suicide

If your loved one is suffering from depression—and is not just “down in the dumps” for a while—he or she can’t “will it” away. Your care-receiver can’t simply decide, “I’m not going to be depressed anymore.” Research shows that depression often has a physiological and emotional basis and is treatable.

Then, too, with all your responsibilities, you yourself might be vulnerable to depression.

Among the commonly accepted signs of depression are:

- A persistently sad, anxious, or empty mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism, and apathy
- Feelings of worthlessness, helplessness, and guilt
- Frequent crying
- A loss of interest in doing things that were once pleasurable
- Disturbed sleep: insomnia, early waking, or oversleeping
- Disturbed eating: a loss of appetite, weight gain, or weight loss
- Decreased energy and constant fatigue
- Recurring aches and pains
- Restlessness and irritability
- Difficulty performing daily tasks, such as going to work
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Neglect in personal appearance
- Thoughts of death or suicide

It may be easier for you to see the signs of depression in your care-receiver than for that person to see the signs in himself or herself. Most people with depression need counseling and/or medication. They need to become better educated about the cycle of depression and learn how to better cope with stress.

If your loved one has four or more of the signs listed above and they persist for several weeks, you would be wise to consult with a health-care professional and share your concerns. Keep in mind that your loved one may be resistant to admitting a problem or agreeing to get help for it.

Your care-receiver should have a physical. Depression can be difficult to diagnose because other conditions have some of the same symptoms. For instance, he or she may be reacting to new medication or may have a physical condition that’s causing the changes in emotions.

One of the most serious and telling symptoms of depression is having thoughts of suicide. Dad may talk about it but not use that word. This isn’t a natural,

coming-to-the-end-of-life thought like “I’m going to die. It may be soon.” Instead, it is “I want out. I just can’t take this anymore. I’m so tired; if I could just rest.”

There is a very high risk of suicide among the elderly. Experts say the actual number of suicides in the senior generation is underreported. Unfortunately, the elderly who do try to kill themselves are usually successful.

This is important: You will not increase the risk of Mom committing suicide if you talk to her about it. Ask her if she’s had suicidal thoughts or feelings. Does she

want to “hurt” herself or have a “plan,” a method, in mind? Her answers will give you a rough idea of how serious the problem is. If she talks about a gun that’s in the house or about stockpiling her medications, that’s serious. If

she’s wheelchair-bound and talks about jumping off a bridge to which she has no access, that might not be as serious.

Here are some suggestions for what you can do to deal with depression in your parent:

—Become educated about depression. Know the signs of depression and the warning signs of suicide. Remember that depressed people can’t control how they feel.

—Get medical help. Get an assessment of a depressed parent. Make sure that your loved one has a physical checkup to eliminate other possibilities for her behavior, and encourage her to get mental health care and the necessary medication.

—Get support for yourself. It’s hard to be around someone who has depression. It’s not contagious, but at times it may feel that way.

—Offer support. Be strong for a depressed parent. Assure your care-receiver that with professional help these feelings will change. Remind him that you’re in this with him. He doesn’t have to have it all together right now. It’s the two of you together facing this problem. Continually reassure him that, with help, this is a temporary condition. He won’t be sure. He may feel as though it will last forever.

—Have fun. Reintroduce pleasure into loved one’s life—and yours.

—Be alert to suicidal thoughts. Even if there is no immediate danger, talk to someone at the local crisis clinic or suicide prevention hotline. Explain what you’re seeing with your loved one and ask if you should be concerned. A professional can help you with whatever steps need to be taken.

It may be easier for you to see the signs of depression in your care-receiver than for that person to see the signs in himself or herself.