

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

Thanks for being there for those of us who need help. My question is regarding a friend of mine who is terribly depressed. I don't know how to help her. Is there anything I can do? Please give me some clues. Thank you very much.

-- Friend in Need

Dear Friend in Need,

First of all, your friend is lucky to have someone who cares enough about her to make an effort to support her through this hard time.

Everyone can get "down" from time to time, usually because of something that has happened. Even psychologically healthy people can feel sad and blue if we are chewed out by our boss, don't get a promotion we worked hard for, have a big fight with our spouse/partner, lose someone we love, are diagnosed with a serious illness, or some other significant life event. Sometimes even normal grief can look like depression, though normal grief is "normal" because it is an appropriate response to loss, and an important part of the healing process.

Most people snap back in a few days, discover their resources to deal with these challenges, and get back into a happy life. However, since you are writing to me, I'm going to assume that your friend has been in this state for more than just a few days.

Depression is not just a passing blue mood; it is a serious problem that includes some of the following symptoms (source: National Institute of Mental Health – NIMH):

- Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed, including sex
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being "slowed down"
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- Insomnia, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping
- Appetite and/or weight loss or overeating and weight gain
- Thoughts of death or suicide; suicide attempts
- Restlessness, irritability
- Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain

It's not necessary to experience all of these symptoms to be appropriately diagnosed as having depression. There is evidence that depression runs in families, and that it may have a biological basis. However, people who suffer from low self-esteem, have little resilience, constantly view themselves and the world through a pessimistic lens, and are overwhelmed with stress, are prone to depression, whether it runs in their family or not. Women report depression about twice as often as men, though it is unclear

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whether women are more prone to depression, or just more likely to admit it, while men cover it up (with substance abuse?). There is good evidence that hormonal changes in women (e.g., menopause) can amplify feelings of depression.

Sadly, in any given year, approximately 9.5 percent of the population (about 18.8 million Americans) suffer from a depressive disorder and most never seek help. This is a national tragedy, since most of these people can be helped. There are excellent interventions to help people overcome the symptoms of depression and find happiness again. A variety of new medications can play a part in a treatment plan that includes psychotherapy with a professional psychologist or counselor who is well-trained in treating people with depression.. If your friend's depression is severe, and she has experienced it for more than a few weeks, it is unlikely that she can just "pull herself out of it" no matter how much she wants to. She needs professional help. Without it, her symptoms could last for weeks, months, or years.

You can't fix your friend, but you can let her know that you love her and are concerned about her. Remind her that she can overcome this problem, as many others have before her. If she is using alcohol or drugs to anesthetize her feelings (as many do) caution her to find another tactic. Include her in your social activities, where she can interact with others in a happy environment. Go to the movies, take a walk, go fishing. Encourage her to reconnect with friends and activities that once gave her pleasure. Be gently insistent, but don't overwhelm her with demands on her time. Give her lots of patience, understanding, affection, and support. Do not ignore any remarks about suicide. Most importantly, let her know that you are there for her and ready to listen when she needs you. Beyond that, the ball is in her court.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.