

HOW TO SUPPORT AN ADULT CHILD WITH DEPRESSION

Depression is a mental health condition that deeply affects how a person feels, thinks and behaves. It is more than just a passing sadness or “having a bad day”; it is a serious disorder that may last for weeks or months, disrupting everyday life. In adults, depression often appears as a **persistent sense of emptiness or hopelessness, loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed, and difficulties fulfilling normal responsibilities**. Those experiencing it cannot simply “snap out of it” by force of will; depression is a genuine medical condition that requires understanding and support.

1. Common symptoms of depression:

- Deep sadness, frequent urge to cry, or a **feeling of emptiness** most of the time.
- **Loss of interest** or pleasure in activities that used to matter or bring joy (work, hobbies, socializing, etc.).
- **Changes in appetite:** eating much less than usual (weight loss) or overeating (weight gain).
- **Sleep disturbances:** trouble falling asleep, waking up very early, or sleeping too much.
- **Persistent fatigue or lack of energy;** ordinary tasks may feel overwhelming.
- **Difficulty concentrating,** thinking clearly or making decisions.
- **Excessive feelings of guilt or worthlessness,** sometimes with harsh self-criticism over past mistakes or situations beyond their control.
- Frequent thoughts about death or **suicidal ideation** (in the most severe cases of depression).

How does depression manifest in adults? For an adult son or daughter (from now on ‘adult child’), depression may also affect aspects of their adult life. For example, they may have **difficulties at work**, experience low productivity or absenteeism due to their mood. They might **withdraw socially**, avoid family gatherings or friendships, or display irritability and mood swings (sometimes depression in adults presents as anger or constant frustration, not just obvious sadness). As a parent, it may be harder to notice these symptoms if you no longer live together, but look out for signs like **less frequent communication**, lack of enthusiasm when speaking, neglect of appearance or responsibilities, or persistent negative comments about themselves or life. These may indicate your adult child is struggling with significant depression.

Depression **is not the fault of the person suffering from it, nor does it reflect a lack of character**. Your adult child has not chosen to feel this way. Depression is influenced by biological, psychological and social factors; it is not a sign of weakness or laziness. Instead of looking for blame, we need to offer support and encouragement. Understanding that depression can affect anyone helps both your adult child and the family to face it with empathy instead of judgement.

2. What to do and what to avoid as a parent

Supporting an adult child with depression can make a huge difference to their recovery. However, parents are often unsure **how to act**: what to say, how to help day-to-day, or which behaviours might be counterproductive. Below you will find practical guidance on **how you can offer emotional and practical support**, and **what is best to avoid** so you don't unintentionally hurt your adult child. These recommendations will help you to be present with understanding and warmth, even if you have no psychological training.

How to support your adult child

- **Listen with empathy and without judgement:** Allow your adult child to speak about what they feel. Pay attention patiently, without interrupting or minimising their pain. Sometimes your adult child may need to vent or simply remain silent; showing you are there and ready to listen at any time is invaluable.
- **Let them know they're not alone:** Remind them they can rely on you. Warm, sincere phrases such as *"I'm here for you; you're not alone in this"* or *"I love you and we'll get through this together"* can provide comfort. Knowing they have your unconditional support gives them security.
- **Acknowledge their emotions:** Recognise and accept what they feel, even if it's hard to hear. You might say *"I understand that what you're going through is very tough"* or *"I can see you're suffering, and it's normal to feel that way"*. These expressions show their feelings are **real and valid**, and they don't need to hide or feel ashamed.
- **Offer practical help with daily life:** Ask if there's something specific you can help with, such as shopping, accompanying them to an appointment, preparing a meal or helping with household tasks if they feel overwhelmed. Small gestures like this ease their daily burden. However, make sure you offer help **without imposing** respect their wish to do some things alone to preserve their independence.
- **Encourage healthy activities (without pressure):** Invite them for a gentle walk together, some fresh air, a film at home or any light activity they used to enjoy. The key is to make suggestions kindly (*"Would you like to go for a gentle stroll this afternoon?"*), without demands or reproach if they decline. Celebrate small steps (such as going out for a bit or sharing dinner with you) – these can help them feel better over time.
- **Be patient and show consistent love:** Recovery from depression takes time and involves ups and downs. There will be better and worse days. Show them you **will be by their side for as long as needed**, with affection and without frustration that *"they're not improving quickly"*. A hug, a heartfelt "I love you", or simply sitting with them in silence when they're low lets them know you're always there for them.

What to avoid

- **Don't minimise their pain:** Phrases like *"cheer up, it's not that bad"*, *"you've got to pull yourself together"* or *"others have it worse than you"* should be avoided. Although you may mean to encourage, such comments **downplay** their feelings and might make them think you don't understand. For them, their suffering is real and significant; minimising it only leads to further withdrawal or guilt for feeling low.
- **Avoid simplistic advice or "magic solutions":** Comments like *"just think positive"*, *"if you wanted, you could get over this"* or *"depression goes away if you exercise"* are not helpful. Depression **is not cured by sheer willpower** or instant positivity. Suggesting it's easy to recover may frustrate them further, because if it were that simple, they'd have done it already. Instead of lecturing, offer support and acknowledge their struggle.
- **Don't blame or scold them for being depressed:** Avoid saying things like *"with all you've got, how can you be depressed?"* or *"you should be stronger"*. These suggest (wrongly) that depression is their fault or that they lack character, which can deepen feelings of **guilt and shame**. Remember: depression is involuntary. Showing anger, impatience or disappointment at their state only makes things worse.
- **Don't compare or compete with their experience:** Phrases like *"everyone goes through tough times, yours isn't that bad"* or sharing stories of someone who "had it worse and got through" aren't helpful. Everyone experiences pain differently. Comparisons can make them feel misunderstood or as if they're failing for not "snapping out of it" like others.
- **Don't invalidate with well-meant but misdirected intentions:** Sometimes, trying to encourage, we may say something hurtful unintentionally, like *"Smile more!"*, *"you should feel better by now"* or *"don't be like that, it makes me sad too"*. This puts pressure on them to pretend they're fine and even makes them responsible for others' feelings. It's better to let them express their sadness freely, without making them feel they're a burden.
- **Don't make jokes or sarcastic remarks about their state:** Even if you're trying to lighten the mood, saying *"have you had your dose of bitterness today?"* as a joke, or any humour about their depression, can hurt. Someone who is depressed usually has little tolerance for humour about their condition; they may see it as mockery or lack of seriousness about their suffering. Keep a respectful and serious tone when discussing the topic, showing you appreciate the gravity of what they're going through.

In summary, **the most important thing** is to offer your adult child **love, understanding and patience**. Every person with depression needs to feel heard and supported, not judged or "fixed" by force. With your empathetic presence, you will undoubtedly help them gradually find their way out of depression.

3. How to encourage your adult child to seek professional help

In many cases, moderate or severe depression **cannot be overcome** with family support alone: it requires intervention from mental health professionals. **When is the right time to seek professional help?** Some signs it is necessary include: if your adult child's symptoms last more than a couple of weeks **without any improvement**, or even worsen; if depression stops them functioning in daily life (for example, unable to work, manage responsibilities or take basic care of themselves); or, most importantly, if they express thoughts of self-harm or you notice behaviours that put their safety at risk. In any of these situations, it is vital to take steps towards professional support as soon as possible.

How can you encourage your adult child to seek help? This is a delicate issue, as those with depression may sometimes deny the seriousness of their condition, fear being judged or feel embarrassed to ask for outside help. To start the conversation, choose a suitable time when you are both calm and have privacy. Speak from a place of care and concern: tell them you are worried about their wellbeing and that you can see they are struggling, so you would like them to get help from a professional. Emphasise that seeing a psychologist or psychiatrist **is not a sign of weakness or "being mad"**, but a brave way to face the situation (just as you would see a doctor for any other illness). Aim for a collaborative rather than commanding tone; that is, don't *order* "you must go to the psychologist", but *suggest* and offer your help to make it easier.

If they are initially reluctant or say they do not want to go, stay calm. Doubts or fear are normal. Gently remind them that professional help has benefited many people and there is nothing wrong with giving it a try. Avoid heated arguments if they refuse; instead, give them some time and **revisit the conversation** a few days later.

Another useful step is to offer **options**: for example, ask if they would prefer to speak first with a psychologist, their GP or even a spiritual adviser (according to their beliefs). The important thing is to take the **first step** towards someone who can assess them and recommend appropriate treatment. If someone close to your adult child has a positive influence (a sibling, partner, close friend), you might ask them to encourage help-seeking too; sometimes hearing advice from another loved one reinforces the message.

Finally, if the situation is critical (for example, if your adult child clearly mentions **suicidal intentions** or you see them in a severely deteriorated state) **do not wait** for them to accept help voluntarily. In these circumstances, seek **emergency support** immediately: call a crisis helpline or emergency services, or take your adult child to psychiatric A&E.

4. How to look after yourself as a parent

Supporting an adult son/daughter with depression can be **emotionally exhausting** for any parent. It's natural to feel worried, sad and even overwhelmed seeing your loved one suffer. At times you might feel **helpless** for not being able to “fix” things quickly or burdened with anxiety and guilt for wondering if you could have prevented it. **These feelings are normal.** However, it's crucial to remember **you matter too** in this equation. If you neglect your own physical and mental health, over time you'll have less strength to support your adult child. Looking after yourself is not selfish, it's an essential part of caring for your adult child in a sustainable and effective way, without burning out.

- **Don't blame yourself:** Your adult child's depression **is not your fault.** You didn't cause it through “bad parenting”, nor do they suffer from it for lack of love. It's a complex condition with biological and environmental factors beyond your control. Reminding yourself of this can help ease the guilt many parents feel. Instead of asking “*Where did I go wrong?*”, focus on the present: how you can support them now, knowing the illness is not because of anything you did or didn't do.
- **Express your own emotions and seek support:** Just as your adult child needs to talk, **so do you.** Share what you're going through with someone you trust: your partner, a close friend, a relative or even a therapist. Speaking about your fears, sadness or frustration with another adult can help you release tension and feel understood. If possible, joining a **support group for families** of people with depression can be very comforting; hearing from other parents in similar situations will make you feel less alone and provide practical advice from experience.
- **Take care of your physical health:** Your physical wellbeing directly affects your mood and resilience. Get enough sleep each night (rest will make you more resistant to stress), eat a balanced diet even if worry takes away your appetite at times, and try to do **physical activity** regularly. A 20–30 minute walk a day, gentle exercise or even relaxation or yoga can help relieve stress. Looking after your body is also caring for your mind. Think of it as they do on planes: you're told to put your own oxygen mask on before helping others; in real life, you must try to be physically well to care for your adult child.
- **Give yourself permission to rest:** Being on call for a depressed adult child 24/7 is unsustainable. **Don't forget yourself.** Set aside time each day or week *just for you*, to do something you enjoy or that relaxes you. Read a book, go for a walk, have coffee with a friend, watch your favourite series, do some gardening... anything that **takes your mind off** constant worry for a while. These breaks recharge your emotional batteries. Even a devoted parent needs to disconnect to reconnect with more patience and empathy afterwards. Don't feel bad about it: taking a breather is necessary and fair.
- **Learn about depression and its boundaries:** Inform yourself using reliable sources (simple books, family guides, talks with professionals) to better understand what your adult child is going through. Knowing that depression is an illness with ups and downs, that improvement takes time, and that your adult child's behaviour (such as apathy or irritability) are symptoms rather than ingratitude towards you, will help you

cope more calmly. At the same time, **accept your own limits**: no matter how much love or knowledge you have, you are not their therapist and can't "cure" them on your own. Don't demand all the answers or expect to solve every problem; sometimes, being present and accompanying is the most (and the best) you can do.

- **Don't hesitate to seek professional help for yourself if needed:** If you feel **overwhelmed** – for example, you're very anxious, have persistent insomnia, or notice you're also becoming depressed because of the situation – consider seeing a psychologist yourself. Seeking professional guidance does not mean you're weak; it means you're strong and wise enough to look after your mental health. A therapist can give you tools to manage stress, work through guilt, or simply offer a safe space to vent without worrying about upsetting other family members. Caring for your own emotional stability will make you a better support for your adult child.
- **Set healthy boundaries and maintain your own life:** It's understandable to want to devote yourself fully to supporting your adult child but try to keep **balance**. Continue spending time on your work, other adult children (if you have them), your partner and personal activities. Don't neglect other important aspects of your life or relationships. This doesn't mean abandoning your depressed adult child but showing them, life continues and they remain part of the family and the world, instead of isolating together around their illness. Also, by maintaining routines you send the message that you believe they can overcome this (if you seem too overprotective or drop everything, they might feel the situation is desperate or that they've become a burden).
- **Practise self-compassion:** Be kind to yourself. There will be days when you feel frustrated or impatient, when you may lose your temper or say something inappropriate out of tiredness. Don't beat yourself up over it. Remember you're doing your best in a difficult situation. Speak to yourself with compassion (as you would to a friend in your place) to help recover from those moments. Recognise your achievements: however small (such as handling a tough situation calmly or simply being there one more day), give yourself credit. Caring for someone with depression is an enormous act of love but also exhausting; you deserve to acknowledge that effort and forgive any mistakes.

Finally, **do not forget your own life and your own sources of happiness**. Maintaining some sense of normality and personal wellbeing not only helps you but also benefits your adult child: they will have a parent who is more emotionally balanced and will see in you an example that seeking happiness is possible even in difficult times.

Looking after yourself is a fundamental part of caring for your adult child.