

EXTRA HELP FOR MOOD DISORDERS

The more serious the mood disorder, the more essential family members and friends are to recovery. Depressed people may be too indecisive or hopeless to seek treatment. When people are elated, they may fear that medication will take away their creativity and energy. Becoming thoroughly informed and using the following steps can help people with mood disorders understand what is happening to them and how treatment can help:

- Recognize what is happening: The easiest way to spot a mood disorder is by noticing your own reaction. If you feel pushed away, criticized, or as though you're the only one making an effort, the other person may be depressed. If you feel annoyed by constant chatter, late hours, or recklessness, the person may be manic.
- Offer feedback: Assure people that their disinterest, indecisiveness, pessimism, poor hygiene, tiredness, and even difficulty feeling love are symptoms of depression and not just because they aren't trying hard enough. Elated people may not be receptive to feedback. During less euphoric intervals, they may be able to understand how they are putting themselves or others in jeopardy.
- Communicate your conviction that help is available and that the person will feel better. Get a pep talk from a professional if you have your own doubts.
- Arrange and accompany people to initial therapy appointments: Before treatment takes effect, depressed people may have trouble articulating their difficulties and absorbing what has been discussed. Take notes and ask questions that loved ones might overlook.
- Give professionals feedback on early signs that medication is helping: Often, the family notices changes before depressed or manic people do.
- Maintain as normal a relationship as possible: Don't give in to wishes to withdraw. Engage loved ones in leisurely walks, massages, card games, and small talk or read to them. Remind them that enjoyment and interest will come in time.
- Assure people that they are still valued: Express affection. Remind them that their mood is separate from who they are, that their "old self" will return and that they will be able to overlook their manic mistakes or temporary lack of accomplishment.
- Avoid criticisms and anything that will aggravate self-condemnation. Break tasks into small, achievable steps. Offer to clean with them to keep them focused or shampoo their hair. Let hygiene go to minimum standards until treatment takes effect.
- Interrupt excessive sleep when people are depressed: Sleeping more than nine hours a day can aggravate the problem.
- Avoid cliché questions and advice: "What's wrong?" "You're not trying hard enough." "Think positively." "Try to relax." "Slow down." Depressed people may be incapable of positive thoughts or of verbalizing what is wrong. Such advice makes them feel worse. Seriously manic people cannot slow down without medication.

FRIENDLY CAUTIONS

Avoid asking friends and relatives for help who are pushy, disinterested, inept, or rigid. Attempts to involve them in your recovery can delay progress. Be cautious of bad advice. Input that makes you feel worse about yourself is probably not correct. Be especially careful of people, self-help groups, and even professionals who tell you that medication is a crutch. Do not argue with bad advice or try to make others understand. Thank people for their concern and tell them you'll consider what they are saying.

MEDICATION

Antidepressants and mood stabilizers are safe and nonaddictive. Side effects will go away with time and “experimenting” to find the most effective medication. Sedating antidepressants are important when insomnia accompanies depression. Tranquilizers such as Valium, Xanax, and Ativan can aggravate depression, but when prescribed with an antidepressant can be helpful. Stimulants such as Ritalin and Dexedrine are energizing but should be prescribed only under special circumstances in conjunction with antidepressants. The herb Saint-John’s-wort can be taken when people are reluctant to use medication if they are not sun-sensitive, at risk for cataracts, or need rapid results. However, prescription medication is necessary for many depressed people and most people who have had a manic episode.

PROFESSIONAL HELP

Counseling is very important when depression is related to a past trauma, a recent loss, or troublesome thinking, behavior, and interaction patterns. Even when medication alone eliminates all symptoms of depression or mania, some counseling is important to help people understand the nature of their disorder, future need for medication, and ways to reduce stress.

NATIONAL NETWORKS AND SUPPORT GROUPS

Because mood disorders often cycle or reoccur, it can be enormously helpful to share experience and wisdom with others who have traveled the same path. Many communities have a local chapter of Depression and Manic-Depressive Association listed in the newspaper or phone book. Resources can be found by calling local mental health centers. There are national networks, newsletters, Websites, and books that offer additional assistance:

- National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association and newsletter: 730 North Franklin St., Suite 501, Chicago, IL 60610-3526, 800-826-3632, www.ndmda.org.
- American Association of Suicidology: 4201 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20008, 202-237-2280.
- SPAN (Suicide Prevention Advocacy Network): 5034 Odin’s Way, Marietta, GA 30068, 888-649-1366, www.spanusa.org.
- National Depression Screening Project: 800-573-4433.
- Bipolar Network News: 5430 Grosvenor Lane, Suite 200, Bethesda, MD 20814.
- National Foundation for Depressive Illness: PO Box 2257, New York, NY 10116, www.depression.org.
- Polars’ Express (a newsletter): MDDA-Boston, 115 Mill St., PO Box 102, Belmont, MA 02178, 617-855-2795, mmddabps@sprintmail.com.
- General Internet sites and links: www.athealth.com/, www.cmhc.com.
- Books: *The Depression Workbook* by Mary Ellen Copeland (New Harbinger Publications, 1992); *His Bright Light* by Danielle Steel, her son’s story; (Delaarte, 1998); *Darkness Visible* by William Styron (Vintage Books, 1992).