

Depression: How can we support our loved ones?

Mental health is an issue that can affect all areas our lives, and is just as important as our physical health. When our mental health isn't in peak condition, we can experience declines in all areas of our lives. According to CHI St. Francis Health's 2016 needs assessment, a strategy report constructed by the St. Francis Board of Directors to promote a healthy community, almost half of those surveyed had one or more days of poor mental health during any given month. Additionally, a quarter of those surveyed indicated to having had several or more days of feeling down, depressed, or hopeless in recent weeks.

The importance of recognizing these emotions of feeling down or hopeless is that they may be signs of depression. Depression is a treatable medical condition, described by feelings of worry, restlessness, guilt, decrease in energy, low self-esteem, and loss of interest in hobbies. We have all felt these emotions at some point in our lives. However when they continue, and affect our quality of life, it may be time to seek medical advice. Individuals who are trained in treating depression are primary care physicians, psychiatrists, and psychologists.

The goal of treating depression is to help the individual find joy in life again. Multiple effective treatments for depression exist, for example, medication and talk therapy. There are many antidepressant medications available, which usually take four to six weeks to work. Talk therapy works by speaking to a trained professional to discover behaviors or ways of thinking that are associated with depression. Depression varies from person to person so don't feel alarmed if it takes time to find the right fit. According to Dr. Patrick Emery, a family medicine physician at the Wahpeton Sanford clinic, treatment in rural settings has advanced in recent years.

"Treating depression in a rural community has become easier the last couple of decades because of better medications with lower side effects," Dr. Emery said, "The difficulty in a rural community is accessing Psychiatry care for difficult to treat depression or depression with psychotic episodes. Thankfully, we have psychologists that are of great benefit to our patients and help add to the overall support that we need to provide to these patients."

If you know someone who is experiencing signs of depression, you may be wondering how you can help them. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and Mayo Clinic offer a long list of suggestions for ways to assist a loved one or friend. Here are three: be understanding, be patient, and be knowledgeable.

Understanding depression means recognizing that feeling depressed and depression are distinctly different. Feeling depressed is an emotional state whereas depression is a medical condition that can be treated with the help of health professionals. Those with depression may feel embarrassed, or are ashamed to admit they have depression. However, acknowledging and understanding that depression is not a character flaw can provide comfort and hope.

Having patience may be hard at times, and depression has no quick fix. Your loved one will have good days and bad days. Just showing them a willingness to support them through this process may be the encouragement they need to get help. Support for your loved one can come in multiple forms, such as offering to attend appointments or support groups with them, or as simply as being a good listener. If your loved one doesn't wish to acknowledge your concerns about depression, let them know you care and will be there if they need you.

Lastly, being knowledgeable about depression does not mean being an expert on depression. But it does include having awareness of the warning signs of suicide. Signals of potential suicide are talking about death, increased use of alcohol, giving away personal items, changing normal routine, having a plan to commit suicide, and social isolation. If you notice these behaviors in your loved one, you have options. Appropriate actions may include talking to your loved one, or with their permission, talking to their doctor about your concerns, calling the suicide hotline, or even 911.

Depression is a challenging, yet treatable condition for those who are struggling with this disease, as well as for friends and family. If you have a loved one who has depression just remember: be understanding, be patient and be knowledgeable.

Hannah Schradick is a third year medical student at the University of North Dakota's School of Medicine and Health Sciences. As a participant in the Center for Rural Health's Targeted Rural Health Education (TRHE) project, Schradick has written this column because of her interest in bringing medical information to rural North Dakota citizens. The information is not for diagnosis or treatment, and should not be used in place of previous medical advice provided by a licensed practitioner.