



**A Resource for Caregivers**

# Understanding Major Depressive Disorder

Caregivers can play an important role in helping their loved one who has major depressive disorder.

This resource is provided to you as an educational resource. It is not intended as, nor is it a replacement for, medical advice and/or treatment from your doctor.

# A Resource for Caregivers: Understanding Major Depressive Disorder



**Take a few minutes to learn about major depressive disorder (MDD) and how you might help someone you care about**

## **You Can Make a Difference**

If you have a friend or family member with MDD, you can help him or her get the most from treatment. In fact, your caring involvement could make a difference in how well your loved one with MDD feels on a day-to-day basis.



## **What Is Major Depressive Disorder?**

### **MDD is a serious health issue**

MDD is much more than just feeling “down” or “blue.” It’s a serious health problem: one that is often treated by a doctor who specializes in mental health. When not properly treated, MDD can interfere with many aspects of a person’s life—work and school, relationships, sleeping, and eating.

MDD occurs in episodes that go well beyond temporarily feeling sad or blue. Some people may have just one episode in their entire lives. Others may have many episodes over the course of their lives.

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**Help your loved one to follow his or her doctor's treatment plan.**

## **Recognizing some of the signs and symptoms of MDD**

**Some common symptoms that may occur in people with MDD include:**

- Sadness, anxiety, or feelings of emptiness
- Feelings of hopelessness or negativity
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness
- Restlessness or irritability
- Loss of interest in things
- Tiredness, low energy
- Trouble thinking, remembering details, or making decisions
- Trouble sleeping, or sleeping too much
- Overeating, or not being interested in food
- Thoughts of suicide or suicide attempts
- Aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or stomach problems that do not go away, even if they are treated

Many people with MDD can feel better with the help of treatment. Treatment may include medicines that help reduce MDD symptoms. It may also include therapy with a mental health professional to help resolve personal issues that may make MDD symptoms worse.

## **Treatment for MDD**

If your loved one is being treated for MDD, it's important that he or she follow the doctor's treatment plan. A treatment plan may include psychotherapy and medicines for MDD.

Some medicines for MDD may cause side effects. Your loved one should talk to his or her doctor if side effects occur.

Encourage your loved one to talk to his or her doctor about what to expect when taking medicines for MDD.



**Remind your loved one to make sure he or she is treated for all health issues.**

## **Other illnesses can play a role**

People with MDD may have other medical conditions too. Some of the most common and serious medical conditions that may occur include diabetes and heart disease. These conditions may make it harder to treat MDD. Similarly, having MDD may affect treatment for certain medical conditions.

People with MDD may have other mental health problems such as anxiety, alcohol abuse and/or drug use, or eating disorders. These other mental health issues may negatively impact treatment for MDD.

These are diseases that should not be ignored. So, while your loved one is being treated for MDD, he or she should make sure to get treated for other health issues as well.

## **You Can Make a Difference**

Encourage your loved one to make his or her regular doctor's appointments for MDD and/or other medical conditions. Symptoms of MDD may get worse if a person's other medical conditions aren't treated appropriately.



## **Personal issues may be a trigger**

Stressful life events are difficult for everyone. However, they may cause a greater impact on your loved one with MDD.

### **Life events may include:**

- Loss of a loved one
- Marriage or relationship trouble
- Money problems, loss of a job, or rising debts

## You Can Make a Difference

One of the hardest things about helping your loved one when things are not going well is helping him or her stay safe. Call for help if you think your loved one may hurt himself or herself or others.



**Make sure your loved one's doctors know about all the medicines he or she is taking.**

## Worsening Symptoms in People with Major Depressive Disorder

Symptoms of MDD may sometimes get worse as a result of an intense response to an event or situation. If not treated, worsening symptoms could result in an emergency.

### **Some signs that your loved one may be getting worse include:**

- Problems with alcohol or drugs
- Not eating or sleeping for several days
- Failing to care for themselves or their families (for example, not getting out of bed, not bathing, not dressing)
- Having trouble with MDD symptoms despite following the treatment plan
- Threatening to do harm to himself or herself or to others
- Seeing or hearing things (hallucinations)
- Believing things that aren't true (delusions)

## Helping your loved one when things are not going well

When your loved one's MDD symptoms get worse, what he or she may need most is support. That's where caring people like you come in.



### Here are a few tips on what you can do to help:

- Offer to go to doctor's visits with your loved one. He or she may appreciate having you there to lend support. You can take the opportunity to ask your loved one's doctor questions about MDD and offer insight on how your loved one is doing at home.
- If your loved one with MDD has a smartphone, he or she can type "depression apps" to search for available apps that may help track his or her day-to-day mood. Using a depression app may help your loved one be more aware of when symptoms change.
- Recognize when your loved one's MDD symptoms change and when it may be time to call his or her doctor.
- Find out what treatment is available for your loved one, including medication, therapy, and support groups (for more information on treatment options, go to: [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)). Work with your loved one and his or her care team to help choose the best options for treatment.
- Work with your loved one's treatment team to find treatments that work.

### You Can Make a Difference

Just being there for your loved one struggling with MDD can make all the difference. Offering love and support to your loved one is the simplest thing you can do.



**Together, you can help your loved one with MDD get the best possible treatment.**

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**There are  
resources  
to get more  
information  
about MDD.**

## **If Your Loved One's Symptoms Are Getting Worse**

If your loved one shows signs of harming him/herself or others, tell someone who can help right away:

- Call his or her doctor's office.
- Call 911 for emergency services.
- Go to the nearest hospital emergency room.
- Call the toll-free, 24-hour hotline of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 to be connected to a trained counselor

## **Resources**

### **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)**

[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

A U.S. mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness.

### **National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)**

[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

A U.S. mental health organization focused on prevention, recovery, and cure of mental illnesses through basic and clinical research. The Institute also conducts research to help find optimal ways to provide available treatments and services directly to the community.

### **Mental Health America**

[www.mentalhealthamerica.net](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net)

A community-based network, with affiliates across the United States, dedicated to helping all Americans live mentally healthy lives through advocacy, education, programs, and services.

### **PsychCentral**

[www.psychcentral.com](http://www.psychcentral.com)

A mental health social network that provides a directory of online psychology and mental health resources for patients.

# Living With Major Depressive Disorder?

**Remember, you are not alone.  
Your treatment team is here to help.**