

Dealing with Your Partner's Depression

What does depression look and feel like to the non-depressed partner? From the perspective of the partner who is not suffering from depression, their partner appears tired, irritable, disinterested in activities, disinterested in sex, unmotivated, 'lazy' in their self-care, or as not participating in household or childcare. These changes are perceived as personal and unwarranted slights against the partner. It can also feel like the depressed partner is behaving this way on 'purpose' or that no one else would react in such manner. The truth is that about 70 million people (1 in 4) will meet criteria for a major depressive disorder someone in their lives.

What is depression?

Symptoms of clinical depression can be physical, emotional, and cognitive.

1. Physical symptoms include persistent fatigue, aches and pains, difficulty sleeping, waking up periodically throughout the night, inability to sleep, sleeping more than usual (9 to 12 hours per day), and eating more or less.
2. Emotional symptoms include persistent sadness, feelings of guilt or a sense of worthlessness and helplessness, increased irritability and anger, loss of interest in one's usual activities, and decreased interest in sex or decreased sex drive, which can have a big impact on the relationship.
3. Cognitive symptoms include distractibility, worrying, mild suspiciousness, difficulty concentrating and difficulty with memory.

How can resentment affect the relationship? It is most challenging for the partner of a depressed person to see depression as an illness and that their partner can't just "snap out of it." When there are symptoms of irritability in one partner, and they're voicing concerns about the relationship, the non-depressed partner may feel the person's depression has nothing to do with them or their relationship; this is best addressed through couples' counseling. Resentment building between partners is a common outcome of one partner's long term depression. The non-depressed partner has a difficult time differentiating between the illness and the person. Repeated feelings of rejection, not wanting to have sex, and irritability and/or criticism from the depressed person can be very hurtful to the non-depressed partner and result in resentment. Even when the non-depressed partner can differentiate between the illness and the person, resentment can sometimes build because it's so difficult to have a partner who suffers from this illness. It may feel like the depressed partner is limiting the other person's ability to enjoy him or herself, that they can't do the things they used to do, or that there's more work to be done by the partner who's not depressed.

What happens if depression goes untreated? When depression goes untreated, the impact it can have on the family and marriage can be devastating. The children may suffer from not receiving the love and attention they need from the depressed partner. They may also begin to internalize some of the negative emotions of the depressed person. The marriage itself suffers when there's persistent unhappiness and the depression goes untreated. The relationship is more likely to become adversarial and unsupportive for both

partners. Household routines and activities may begin to unravel and the security of routines may erode away because they are no longer followed by the depressed person.

Is it possible to get the relationship back to a positive state? Yes but important steps need to be taken. If there's been persistent unhappiness and resentment has built up over time, the trust that would normally exist between partners has probably declined and can be difficult to reestablish. The key is not to let the marriage get to that point in the first place by treating the depression as soon as possible. Even if the depression has gone untreated for some time, the willingness of both partners makes it possible to re-strengthen the relationship. This may involve a combination of individual therapy for the depressed person, medication for the depressed person, and couples counseling.

How to stay supportive and keep the relationship going. In order to be supportive of a depressed partner, you must distinguish between actions of the person and outcomes of the depression. This can be facilitated through couples' therapy but it is equally important for the non-depressed partner to have outside support. It's important for both partners to have a sense of connection with others. Additionally, the person who's not depressed should not be responsible for being the sole support of the depressed person.

It's crucial to keep in mind that the other person may be feeling vulnerable, insecure, and scared about what's going to happen, whether or not the other person will ever recover from their depression, and what it means for their relationship. The most important thing to keep in mind is that depression is treatable and that by drawing on the strengths of each other along with maintaining patience and compassion, it is possible to get the relationship back to a loving state.