

Coping with A Loved One's Depression

This is what I've learned living with a spouse with depression:

1. I need to be flexible: When she is in the depths of the shadow, I need to protect her; when she is functioning in the normal range I need to give her space. Don't be shy about taking the car keys or other drastic action when your loved one appears to be "out of control", since you may be saving their life.
2. I can help her understand the dynamics of her depression. For example, I can help her recognize what "triggers" a depressive cycle and I can help her implement actions to stop the downward spiral into the deep shadows. Using these prevention points can avoid the coming pain.
3. I am a caregiver, and I need to know my boundaries. I have a life too, with feelings and needs. I need to maintain my "separate self" and not just become a slave to the depression. Yes, I need to sacrifice and forgo some of my plans and commitments, but I will quickly burn out if I don't also care for myself.
4. TV is a drug. Most of it is not healthy for me or my spouse. A walk is much more therapeutic.
5. There is no golden answer waiting to be found in books or other literature. Yes, it's good to know the basics of depression and the specifics of your loved one's diagnosis, but you will not find a cure in a book.
6. Change the subject if your loved one is cascading into the pit. They can easily get into a cycle where one negative thought breeds another negative thought and they can't seem to stop the descent.
7. Try to maintain some level of social-activity in which you can both participate, such as going to movies. The depressed person will probably withdraw and avoid social situations. They need some "quiet time" and personal space, but that can quickly become brooding time that leads to another slide into the depths.
8. Do the best you can with what you've got. You cannot work miracles and you are not superman/superwoman.
9. Share with family/friends about the situation so they can support both you and your loved one. If you don't tell people, they will not know. The best action they can take is prescribed in "When Bad Things Happen to Good People", by Rabbi Kushner: listen and "be present" for the person in pain. After going through this, you realize how few people actually do that. One or two good friends/family members are invaluable to provide support to you.
10. And very importantly, plan future activities, for both of you, and activities that just one of you will do. Plan for evenings later in the week, for weekends, for a "getaway" next month, for a weeklong mini-vacation a few months from now, for a holiday trip, etc. Hope is crushed by depression, so it's important to have events scheduled in the future, which helps both of you have something to look forward to.

Take a step at a time, since you cannot control the journey in and out of depression.

Peace be with you. Stan Schroeder

Mental Health Ministries (www.MentalHealthMinistries.net)