

Depression and Dementia

People with dementia often suffer from depression, especially when they have some awareness of losing their abilities in the early to moderate stages of disease. The person may become self-conscious about saying or doing the wrong thing and avoid friends and family. They may feel sensitive about others being condescending or treating them like children. They may grieve the future they used to imagine and worry about what will happen to them as the dementia progresses. People with dementia often feel guilty about being or becoming a burden on their loved ones. They may struggle with feeling useless and have a difficult time finding ways to be helpful. Sometimes the person can feel utterly hopeless and despairing, and think that they would be better off dead.

People with dementia who suffer from depression are at risk for suicide and should be evaluated by their doctor or mental health professional. Medications are an important part of treatment for depression. In addition, the person will need a lot of support to stay active and engaged. Organizations like the [Dementia Alliance International](#) and the [Alzheimer's Association](#) offer peer support groups and other services. Individual and couples counseling can also be helpful. Religious or spiritual communities may offer support. This handout offers practical ideas for supporting persons with depression and dementia. These tips are not intended to replace proper medical and mental health treatment.

While this handout focuses on the person with dementia, it is important to acknowledge that depression is also very common among family caregivers. Seeking treatment and support for your own physical and mental health should be a top priority.

IF	THEN
The person is giving up activities and isolating themselves from others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remember that the person has an illness that affects their brain and they are doing the best they can. Try to think of creative ways to turn day-to-day activities into special rituals. For example: bathing can become 'spa day', watching television can be 'movie night', walking can be 'endurance training', eating a meal can be a 'date'. Use words and props that help 'set the stage'. Consider ways to adapt former roles to help maintain the person's sense of purpose and meaning. If the person has always been 'a provider' or 'a nurturer', maybe they can help take care of a pet or garden. If they're used to being in charge, maybe they can be a 'director' and tell others how to do things they used to do (like cook or fix things).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make an effort to try new things together. Brainstorm some ideas and write them down on a 'bucket list'. For example: try painting, singing karaoke, cooking a new recipe, dancing, taking a day trip, record yourselves telling stories, play hand drums, do a jigsaw puzzle together, Facetime with friends or relatives, etc. • Ask other people to make regular lunch or coffee dates with the person. You can use websites like http://lotsahelpinghands.com/ to coordinate your 'support team'. • Find ways to show the person your love and appreciation. • Consider more passive activities like going for a drive, listening to music, watching old movies or television shows, observing nature or people from a bench or window. • If the person is apathetic due to their dementia, it may be best to lower expectations about their level of engagement. Sometimes caregivers have to give themselves permission to stop trying so hard to get the person to do things. • Apathy is similar to depression and is very common in persons with dementia. If the person is apathetic, it may be best to lower expectations about how engaged he or she will be. Sometimes caregivers have to give themselves permission to stop pushing so hard.
IF	THEN
The person appears sad and becomes tearful or cries easily	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remember that the person is not doing this on purpose or trying to make you feel bad. They have an illness that affects their brain and they are doing the best they can. • If the person responds well to affection, offer a hug, hold their hand, or rub their back • Empathize with the person's feelings even when it does not make sense to you why they are sad or crying. Sometimes the person themselves will not understand or be able to articulate why they feel the way they do.

- Here are some examples of helpful things to say:
 - *You seem sad to me today. Is there something bothering you? Can we talk about it?*
 - *I am sorry this is so difficult, I want to help. We'll get through this together.*
- Avoid telling the person they should not feel sad.
- Comfort the person as you would comfort any normal adult with a respectful tone of voice
- Avoid using terms of endearment that are commonly used for children and might be condescending to an adult
- If the person seems to be stuck in negative thoughts, validate their thoughts/feelings, and then try to gently redirect them to something else. For example, you might say:
 - *I am sorry things are so hard. I wish there was more we could do about it. For now, maybe we can try to go out and enjoy an ice cream together?*
 - *When I feel sad, I like to go for a walk (eat ice cream, hit a punching bag, bake cookies, watch a movie, etc.) Will you join me? Let's try going for a walk.*
- Consider helping the person join a peer support group. If one is not available in your area, others have found 12-step groups helpful.
- Consider holding a family meeting if there is conflict or misunderstanding among family members that is affecting the person.
- Limit access to alcohol and monitor for overuse
- Remove or secure guns, medications, and other things that could be used for self-harm

IF	THEN
<p>The person becomes severely distressed or inconsolable</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take a deep breath and do your best to stay calm yourself • Reduce background noise (turn off television) and dim any bright lights if possible • Sometimes it helps to have another familiar person, like a neighbor or relative call or visit to distract and reassure the person <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Arguing with the person or trying to physically restrain them is likely to make the situation worse ○ If there is any immediate threat of danger to the person or anyone else, call 911 ○ Contact the person's doctor to make an urgent appointment to rule out an underlying medical cause and consider pharmacologic treatment ○ If you are at the end of your rope and need help figuring out what to do at any time day or night, call the Alzheimer's Association's 24/7 Helpline at 1-800-272-3900 <p>Once the situation de-escalates, consider developing a crisis response plan with the person for managing situations like this in the future. Here is more information about crisis response plans from the National Association for Mental Illness: https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/Family-Members-and-Caregivers/Being-Prepared-for-a-Crisis</p>