



A Carer's Guide to Depression in People with a Learning Disability

Fife Clinical Psychology Department
Lynebank Hospital
Halbeath Road
Dunfermline
Fife
KY11 4UW

Tel: 01383 565 210
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This booklet has been written for parents and carers of
people with a learning disability

This booklet aims to:

- Help you to recognise signs of depression
- Highlight things you can do to help
- Suggest other sources of help and support
- Suggest how you can find support for yourself

It is important to remember that you are not alone – there is a wide range of support, services and professionals available to help you and the person you care for.

What is depression?

Everybody feels fed up, miserable or sad at times. Sometimes there's a reason, sometimes these feelings just come out of the blue. They don't usually last longer than a week or two, and they don't interfere too much with our lives.

Depression is different from these short episodes of unhappiness that we all experience from time to time. It goes on for much longer. It can last for months rather than days or weeks.

Below is a list of some of the symptoms that people with depression experience. They may not experience all of these symptoms.

- feeling unhappy most of the time
- less interest in activities which are usually enjoyed
- finding it harder to make decisions
- unable to cope with things that you used to
- feeling restless and agitated
- eating too little or too much
- losing weight
- feeling tired all the time
- inability to sleep or waking up too early
- sleeping all the time
- losing your self-confidence
- avoiding other people
- being snappy and irritable
- feeling worse at a particular time each day, usually in the morning
- feeling useless, inadequate and hopeless
- feeling bad or guilty, or worthless
- thinking life isn't worth living
- thoughts of suicide

Many people will get depressed at some time in their lives,
including people with learning disability.

What are the signs of depression?

Some individual's with a learning disability are not able to express their feelings easily in words. So their actions may have to speak for them. Sudden changes in behaviour or mood, or not being able to do the things they could previously do may all be important signs of changes in mental health.

Signs to look out for are:

- sudden or gradual changes in usual behaviour
- seeking reassurance
- loss of skills
- loss of bowel or bladder control
- loss of ability to communicate
- outbursts of anger, destructiveness or self harm
- physical illness
- complaining about aches and pains
- wandering or searching

What causes depression?

The reasons why someone people suffer from depression differ from one person to the next, and often there is more than one cause.

Some causes of depression in people with a Learning Disability are:

- Bereavement
- Loss, ie a favourite carer leaving, siblings leaving home, separation from families
- Changes in living situation, ie moving home to live in the community, other residents moving on
- Changes in routine, ie adapting to frequent staff changes
- Illness
- Abuse

Sometimes there can be no obvious cause for depression.

What can I do to help?

Although it is sometimes not possible to prevent some of these things happening, proper preparation and explanation can help.

What can help?

- Good planning and organisation to limit the number of changes
- Taking care to explain changes to the individual
- Helping the individual to express their worries and feelings

What other help is available?

GP

Most family doctors are quite used to dealing with emotional problems. But not all family doctors will have had training in how to recognise depression in people with learning disabilities. So don't forget that you are the expert when it comes to telling the doctor about the changes you have noticed in the person you are worried about. You may have to explain that the depression is not part of the condition which caused the learning disability, but is something new and different.

Psychologist

Psychological approaches play an important role in the treatment of anyone who is depressed. The opportunity to talk about problems, and finding practical ways of dealing with them, are essential parts of treatment. Such approaches can be very successful with people with learning disability too, as long as they are adapted to their levels of communication and understanding. Books, photographs, pictures or drawings, for example, may help them to understand or explain their feelings better than words alone can do.

What other help is available? Continued...

Drug Treatment

When depression is severe, an anti-depressant antidepressant drug will be needed. Anti-depressants can take up to 4 weeks to have their full effect. They should be taken for at least 4 to 6 months after the depression has lifted, for it may reappear if the tablets are stopped too soon. The prescribing doctor, usually the GP, will see how the treatment is going with regular appointments and will advise on when to stop the tablets.

Social Support

Loneliness or lack of anything interesting to do during the day may be a cause of depression, or can make depression worse. Help from Social Services, voluntary organisations, parent groups and other support groups can help to deal with such problems.

In severe depression, people may feel that life is not worth living. If you think someone feels this way, go to your GP as soon as possible to discuss your concerns.

Summary: What can you do to help?

DO ask for help.

It's not normal for someone to feel depressed just because they have a disability.

DO be patient and remember that depression is an illness, and that most people get better.

DO make sure they keep taking any tablets they are on, but watch out for any side effects and report these to the doctor or nurse immediately.

DO listen to how they feel, and if they are having counselling, help them to keep their appointment.

DO encourage eating and drinking properly - the right nourishment and enough of it. People with depression often lose weight.

DO encourage going out and joining in activities they have previously enjoyed, but don't bully them into doing things.

DON'T forget your own needs - it can be very wearing living with a depressed person. Talking to other carers can be helpful, as can having regular breaks.

DON'T think depression is a slur on the family or on your care. Be clear that it is not a form of madness.

DON'T make decisions about a change of home when someone is depressed. It's much harder to cope with a move at such a time.

If your doctor suggests ways in which you might help to deal with some of the problems, do try to carry these out.

Useful Organisations:

The Princes Royal Trust - Fife Carers Centre

Provide accurate, up-to-date information on carer's issues help and advice on resources, benefits, advocacy, or simply a listening ear.

Web: <http://www.fifecarerscentre.org.uk>

The Princes Royal Trust for Carers

The Trust aims to make it easier for carers to cope by providing support, practical help and information.

Web: <http://www.carers.org>

Crossroads

Crossroads aim to help relieve the stress on those who care for people (of any age) with a physical, mental or sensory impairment by enabling carers to take a break. There are three fife groups offering free respite care, at regular intervals at a time that suits carers.

Fife Central: 01592 610540

Dunfermline: 01383 621774

Web: <http://www.crossroads.org.uk>

Books:

The Royal College of Psychiatrists has produced a helpful series of 'Books beyond words', which use pictures to help people understand certain life events which can be particularly distressing such as bereavement and times of transition. Supporting text and guidelines are given at the back of each book.

Web: <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/publications.aspx>

If you need further information, a list of helplines, voluntary agencies and websites are also available on our website for carers and people with a learning disability:

Web: <http://www.moodcafe.co.uk/>