

Coping With Disease and Depression

Target Audience: People coping with any chronic disease including diabetes.

Objectives: Participants will:

1. Be able to define depression.
2. Know some common symptoms of depression.
3. Be able to identify and evaluate symptoms in themselves.
4. Identify the best treatment options for depression.

Time Required: 30 minutes; for a 15-minute presentation, review briefly the symptoms of depression and possible remedies and eliminate Joe's story and plant analogy

Equipment: Overhead projector and dry-erase pen

Prop: House plant

Handouts: "[Lift Your Spirits](#)," "[Recommended Readings for Coping With Diabetes and Depression](#)," "[Lift My Spirits Contract](#)"

Note: Text in italics can be used if the audience is concerned only about diabetes.

Lesson Plan

A year ago Joe sprained his ankle and hobbled around with crutches for a couple of weeks. Last week he had a cold, but that lasted only a few days. Now Joe has learned that he has a chronic disease (*diabetes*) that will never be cured with crutches or a pill. Reality begins to sink in for Joe when he learns that this disease (*diabetes*) will be with him the rest of his life and won't magically go away. (*Plus, he realizes that from now on he will have to prick his finger several times a day, watch the amount of starch and sugar he eats, control portion sizes, and possibly have to start giving himself insulin injections. After all this, Joe begins to think to himself, "What do I have to look forward to—possibly going blind or being hooked up to a dialysis machine, having a toe amputated, or a having a heart attack?"*) Life looks pretty bleak to Joe. (*Ask people to think about how they felt after they were first diagnosed.*)

Dealing With Your Feelings

Just like Joe, when you first learned about your disease (*diabetes*) you might have had many feelings. Maybe you refused to accept the diagnosis and tried to pretend that you didn't really have this problem (*diabetes*). Perhaps you felt you were flawed in some way. You may have been angry and wanted to blame someone or something. Or, maybe you even felt sad and had no motivation to do anything. Whatever emotions you felt, they likely got better in a few days or weeks and may have actually helped you gradually adjust to your new lifestyle. However, some people experience feelings of sadness, fatigue, or despair for a long time. They withdraw from life and may not feel like talking or being around other people. If these feelings last for more than a couple weeks, a person may have clinical depression.

Recognizing Depression

(Show overhead entitled “The Facts About Depression.”) Depression is common and can seriously affect one’s life. Approximately 20 percent of women and 10 percent of men will experience depression at some point in their lives. Some experts believe that up to 30 percent or more of people with diabetes are depressed. There are many symptoms of depression, and they often build upon one another making the situation worse. (Review the overheads entitled “Symptoms of Depression” [there are three].) If left untreated, severe depression may cause you to take poor care of your disease (diabetes), indulge in various forms of reckless behavior including alcohol or drug abuse, or even attempt suicide.

Is Depression More Common in People With Chronic Diseases?

Having a chronic disease (*like diabetes*) can make it difficult for you to feel good about yourself. *(But is depression more common in people with diabetes?)* Many studies have shown that depression is more common in people suffering from a medical condition. This may be due to many factors including the need to constantly manage the disease or the fear of current or future complications.

(Also, poor control of your blood glucose can create symptoms similar to depression. [Ask audience members to think about how they felt the last time their blood glucose was out of range.] Out-of-control blood glucose levels or a change in medical treatment can leave you feeling wiped out with no energy left to get involved in rewarding activities.)

Getting Your Health and Life Back on Track

(Use the analogy of plants and people, show house plant: Plants have certain things that they need to stay healthy. Ask the audience to list a few of the necessary things plants need to grow and thrive. Focus on the fact that if plants don’t receive these things, they will wilt and dry out. Next, relate this concept to people. People will also “wilt and dry out” if they don’t get the necessary things to survive. Just like a wilted plant, people with depression need help. Once they receive treatment, they begin to take on new life and thrive again.)

If you think you might be depressed, it is important to take action. The following suggestions can help you cope:

1. See your primary doctor first. *(Review overhead entitled “Getting Your Health and Life Back on Track [1].”)* Tell your doctor about your symptoms and ask for a checkup to rule out any physical reason for your problems. Possible physical causes include:

- Out-of-control blood glucose levels—high or low blood glucose
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Side effects of medication
- Thyroid disorder
- Blood chemical imbalance, such as potassium, sodium, etc.
- Anemia (caused by iron, folate, or vitamin B12 deficiency).

2. Plan an activity every day to lift your spirits. (Show overhead entitled “Getting Your Health and Life Back on Track [2].”) If the cause of depression is not due to a physical problem, plan something every day to bring zest back into your life. Ways to care for yourself when feeling depressed include:

- **Joining a (*diabetic*) support group.** Sharing your thoughts and feelings with others who experience the same things you do can help you get fresh insights. You may also learn new skills for taking care of yourself that may help you feel more in control.
- **Exercising.** Moving (taking a walk or walking the dog, swimming, joining an aerobic class) can work wonders for how you feel. It can (*lower your blood glucose*), increase your energy, and release substances called endorphins into your blood that will improve your mood.
- **Talking to family or friend(s).** Sharing your feelings can help release pent-up emotions. Your loved ones may also be able to work with you to achieve your self-management goals.
- **Keeping a journal of the good things in life and other positive thoughts.** Write down a poem or prayer that has meaning to you. At the end of the day, list the good things that happened to you so you can count your blessings. Go back and re-read these things whenever you’re feeling blue.
- **Planning to do one thing every day that you might enjoy.** Go shopping, work in the garden, go for a walk at the park, or have lunch with friends. If you don’t plan a fun activity, it won’t happen.
- **Volunteering/helping others.** Helping others makes you feel good about yourself. You will feel valuable because you will make a difference in someone else’s life.

3. See a specialist. (Show overhead entitled “Getting Your Health and Life Back on Track [3].”) If your symptoms do not go away after repeated attempts to overcome your depression, ask your doctor to refer you to a mental health specialist. Depending on your community, this person may be a psychologist, psychiatric nurse, social worker, psychiatrist, or a certified or licensed professional counselor.

4. Take an antidepressant. (Show overhead entitled “Getting Your Health and Life Back on Track [4].”) For serious or long-term depression, seeing a professional may not be enough. The right antidepressant, used alone or in combination with therapy, can be a great help in improving depression. Antidepressants combat chemical imbalances and restore normal brain chemistry. (*Be sure your therapist knows you have diabetes. Some antidepressants may interfere with your blood glucose control or have other side effects.*)

On the Road to Recovery

Just by seeking help, you'll take the biggest step toward feeling like your old self again. Life with a chronic disease (*diabetes*) doesn't have to be a life of depression. Keep in mind that managing your disease isn't about perfection. It's about learning to balance your physical and emotional needs so you stay happy and healthy. You need to give yourself credit for all the hard work you've already put into managing your health (*and your diabetes*). Depression may feel like being trapped in a deep, dark hole, but there's hope knowing that with help, you can break free and live a happy life (*with your diabetes*). (Pass out "Lift Your Spirits," "Recommended Readings for Coping With Diabetes and Depression," and Lift My Spirits Contract" handouts.)