



# Mental Health - Depression and Carers

**Caring for someone can be a 24 hour job that is emotionally, physically and financially very stressful.**

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## Carers and depression

A study by Robert Cummins of the school of psychology at Deakin University reveals that carers who look after frail, disabled or mentally ill relatives suffer "extraordinary" rates of depression and have the lowest level of wellbeing of any group in society. Almost 40 per cent of carers were estimated to fall in the "severe" to "extremely severe" range of depression, and those caring for people with a traumatic brain injury and other types of brain disorder are no exception.

While the term "depression" is commonly used to describe a temporary decreased mood when one "feels blue", clinical depression is a serious illness that involves the body, mood, and thoughts and that cannot simply be willed or wished away. It is often a disabling and affects a person's work, family and school life, sleeping and eating habits, general health and ability to enjoy life.

## Signs to watch out for

Sometimes, despite the best efforts, carers may start to show signs of depression such as:

- moodiness that is out of character
- increased irritability and frustration
- finding it hard to take minor personal criticisms
- spending less time with friends and family
- loss of interest in food, sex, exercise or other pleasurable activities
- being awake throughout the night
- increased alcohol and drug use
- increased physical health complaints like fatigue or pain
- slowing down of thoughts and actions.

If you are experiencing these sorts of symptoms then it is important that you speak to your GP about it as soon as possible. Clinical depression does not just go away, and early treatment is much more effective than delayed treatment.

## Prevention

Caring for a person with a traumatic brain injury is difficult, especially when there are challenging behaviours. Respite care is one of the most critical supports needed so that carers can get time away to relax. Other tips include:

- ask for help when you need it
- take time for yourself
- exercise, eat well and rest
- relax regularly
- keep up social contacts
- attend a carers group for support
- access and use available services
- acknowledge and deal with feelings.



The best way to deal with your feelings is to accept them, but make sure you can talk about your feelings with someone who understands, whether it is a family member, friend, counsellor or support group. Depression is always a potential concern for carers, and you should seek professional help if it becomes a serious issue.

### **Self-advocacy**

At some point, carers will find themselves unhappy with the level of support from a particular hospital, health professional or welfare association. You have the right to expect appropriate support or treatment, and should be assertive in claiming what you want. There are grievance procedures and appeal processes in most cases. Synapse may be able to assist you with, or link you to appropriate advocacy organizations.

### **Support groups**

You can meet others in a similar position, have a break, find information and get support from others who know what your situation is like. Sharing ideas, feelings and concerns can help you feel less isolated. Sometimes friends won't understand your situation, but a support group will. If there are no support groups in your area, consider joining our online brain injury forum.

### **Maintain your friendships**

Maintain an identity of your own separate from the caring role, and keep your links to the world outside caring.

Be aware that some friends may tire of you talking about the problems of being a carer. You may become resentful and lose friends by expecting them to provide more support than they are willing to give.

Where possible, seek support from other carers and don't expect too much from friends, even if it means pretending to be interested in things other than your own problems as a carer.

### **Plan for the future**

Where possible, it's better to act than react. Instead of worrying about the future (e.g. who will take on the caring role if you can't?) think through all the potential future problems and make plans now. It will bring peace of mind to yourself, family and the person you are caring for.

Plan for future emergencies and events this way you are ensuring the best possible care for the person that you provide care to. By planning ahead will also ensure minimized stress for others if you are unable to provide care.