Hi Alice,

I know that when a friend is depressed, it's important to reach out, discuss the issue, and be there for the person as much as possible. But that's quite hard to do when I myself have a history with depression? I feel as if her emotions are taking me back to a place that I don't want to go. I really empathize with my friend and feel her pain, but at the same time know that I'd be useless to both of us if I'm in the troughs too. How can I help without sacrificing my always precarious emotional equilibrium?

Thanks, Blind Leading the Blind

Answer

Dear Blind Leading the Blind,

Your personal history with depression has probably helped you pinpoint some of the depressive behaviors or symptoms that your friend is currently exhibiting. Whether your friend has been formally diagnosed by a clinician or is simply showing some common signs of depression, your desire to help is as clear as it is noble. However, you may find that getting too involved with your friend's depression may bring you down as well, which can consequently reduce your ability to support others. Fortunately, there are many ways you can help your friend make it through this difficult time without neglecting your own mental and emotional well-being.

The concern that your friend's depression will resuscitate your own is a legitimate one. However, research shows that although there's a strong chance that your friend's depression will affect you in the short term, the chances of your friend making you feel depressed for an extended period of time are about equal to the chances of you cheering him or her up. In a 2011 study, adolescents were tested and split into various depression groups. After being matched with individuals of different depression groups, 73% of adolescents remained within their original depression group overtime.

With that said, you are not responsible for treating your friend's depression. If you choose to do so, however, you may help your friend achieve recovery by listening compassionately, connecting her or him to helpful resources, and by encouraging her or him to get out of the house. Consider giving the following a try:

- **Listen instead of giving advice.** Express your concern and ask plenty of questions, but
do not attempt to diagnose or design a treatment plan for your friend.

- **Express empathy and reinforce the point that your friend is not alone.** Let her or him know that you care and that her or his life is important to you.
- **Address your own needs.** If you’re frustrated with or sad about your friend’s depression, don’t allow these feelings to accumulate. Let your friend know how you’re feeling; otherwise s/he may notice your negative affect or frustration, making both of you feel worse.
- **Set boundaries.** Do not take on the responsibility of acting as a counselor or therapist. Be honest with your friend and let her or him know that you want to help, but that you are concerned about maintaining your own mental health.
- **Reach out and seek post-remission care.** You may need some support of your own if your friend’s depression triggers yours in any way. Identify people and resources in your own life that you can lean on for support. Relapse rates for individuals who have histories of depression are high. However, with long-term therapy and medication adherence, the probability of relapse decreases significantly.
- **Research and refer.** Individuals experiencing depression often feel exhausted and unmotivated, which makes it difficult for them to seek treatment. Help your friend by researching local counselors, therapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists who specialize in depression. You can help your friend schedule the appointment or even accompany her or him to the visit.
- **Pitch in.** As long as your friend is in a depressive state, s/he may find it difficult to complete necessary and seemingly easy tasks. Offer to help around the house or drive your friend to appointments.
- **Get moving.** Research has shown that healthy habits such as regular physical activity help to reduce symptoms of depression. Going on walks or attending yoga classes together may help relieve some of your friend’s negative feelings.

There are lots of questions about depression in the Go Ask Alice! archives that you may look over and think about. You may find you want to talk to a counselor. You can check out HelpPRO’s Therapist Finder to locate a therapist in your area.

Depression is difficult to cope with, whether it’s affecting you, a friend, a coworker, or a loved one. Your ability to empathize combined with your background knowledge of, and experience with, depression will undoubtedly help you help your friend; the degree to which you become involved in her or his recovery is up to you.

Alice!
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