

Due to the recent untimely and tragic death of actor and comedian Robin Williams, this edition of Frontline Focus features two stories about coping with depression and chronic illness. Additional stories, videos, webinars and online resources are available on these and many more topics at the Optum Behavioral Solutions Live and Work Well website, [liveandworkwell.com](http://liveandworkwell.com).

## Coping with Depression in a Family Member

Depression can be a serious illness that afflicts anyone regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity or social status. Depression in an individual affects everyone in the family. Initially the depressed person may have symptoms (intense sadness, sleeping and concentration problems, guilt, increased or decreased appetite, loss of energy) that are confusing to the rest of the family. Sometimes a depressed person denies having the symptoms which makes it harder for others to be helpful and understanding. If someone in your family suffers from depression it is important for you to understand how it can affect you and others in the family.

### Helpful Strategies

Unfortunately, there is still a stigma attached to being depressed. Depression is a condition that is caused by many factors. Stress, suffering a major loss such as a job or a loved one, can trigger a depressive episode. There is also a genetic component to depression as there is with many medical illnesses. Educate yourself about depression. In some cases it may be appropriate to talk to your family member's doctor about depression.

Accept that you may have mixed feelings. When someone is depressed it affects the entire family. There may be a change in the household routines. You may be asked to take on more responsibility and be involved in the treatment process. This can be frustrating. This frustration can sometime turn into anger if you are having a hard time communicating with the person who is depressed. These feelings are a normal part of the adjustment process. It is important that you be able to both accept and express your own

feelings when someone else is depressed. This may be particularly hard for children who will have a hard time understanding the changes in their parent's behavior.

Encourage your family member to stick with treatment. Treatment appointments, although very helpful, can bring up issues that may be hard to face. If your family member is balking at treatment and considering quitting, encourage them not to do so. Suggest that they talk to their therapist about their concerns immediately. Most physicians and therapists who treat depression encourage family involvement in the treatment of depression. It may be helpful to attend a session in order to understand the treatment process and learn what you can do to be helpful and still manage your own feelings.



Encourage your family member to take their medications as prescribed. If your family member is taking medication for depression learn as much as you can about the medicine including how much and how often the medicine should be taken. Most medications for depression take a while to work. Unfortunately, some medicines also have side effects that leads patients to stop taking them. Most of the newer medicines have fewer side effects than in the older ones. Nevertheless, it is common for people to want to stop taking the medication before it has had a chance to work or because of a side effect. Encourage your loved one to take their medications as prescribed. If you have concerns about their medications, ask if you can accompany them to their doctor's visit and talk to the doctor about your concerns.

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If your family member is not in treatment, encourage them to seek professional help. It is common for someone who is depressed to refuse to get help. Sometimes it takes a crisis before a person will accept help. The best thing you can do is to encourage the person to get help. If they continue to refuse to get help



do not give up. Consider attending support groups in your community or seeing a trained clinician. Find out what you can do to take care of yourself and to get your family member in treatment.

Learn the warning signs of suicide. Not everyone with depression becomes suicidal. However, people who are struggling with an episode of major depression sometimes experience despair and have suicidal thoughts and feelings. Take suicide threats seriously. If you are worried about your family member, call their therapist or doctor immediately or support them in making the call. If urgent action is needed, call 911 or take them to the emergency room. Let your family member know that they are important to you and assure them that help is available. Seek help from family and friends.

Don't do it alone. Involve other family members, friends, clergy. Take advantage of the community resources that are available to you. Check the appropriate Internet sites and/or call your local hospital to find support groups in your area. If you find that you need extra support, seek help from a professional clinician.

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# Accepting and Coping with a Chronic Illness

## Reactions to Illness

Reactions to learning of one's chronic illness are varied, but they are always powerful. Emotions may range from shock to relief, and everything in between. Even when symptoms have been present for a long time, the diagnosis can be upsetting.

While shock may be the first reaction to learning your diagnosis, denial is also common, as are anger and grief over the loss of health. Many people struggle to understand their condition, asking, "What does this mean? Is this a mistake? Is there a cure?" This sense of shock and denial is very common, but it does have a purpose. Dr. Kubler-Ross explains that the reaction may actually facilitate the individual's eventual acceptance of the news by allowing time to process the overwhelming information at a more comfortable pace.

While denial is natural, it can be unhealthy if it hinders your ability or willingness to care for yourself, comply with treatment, and establish treatment goals. An eventual acceptance of the condition is critical in taking control of the condition and effectively managing it.

## Coping Techniques

With more than 100 million people having a chronic illness, it may be reassuring to know that many continue to lead fairly normal lives. Most people with chronic conditions learn to adapt psychologically and physically to their illness. Effectively managing a chronic condition is certainly a challenge but not impossible. Here are some suggestions for coping:

- **Learn all you can about your condition and treatment.** Becoming a student of your condition can be an important way to know what is going on with your body. Use as many sources as you can to gather information. Learn about your medications and watch for their side effects. Follow your physician's instructions and keep focused on the goal – getting to the point of effective disease management. Be sure to use trusted sources of medical information when doing your research - you may want to begin by talking to your medical team.
- **Build your medical team and develop good relationships with the team members.** You are a primary member of this team. Your physician may have the latest information on medical treatments, but a dietician will be able to provide you with nutritional information. A social worker will be able to direct you to support groups and community supports. If you are a diabetic you may want to make sure that you have an ophthalmologist and optometrist, a dentist and a podiatrist on your team.

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Build your team wisely based upon your research and try to coordinate your care with all the team members.

- **Be aware of your attitude and mental health.** It can directly impact your health and healing. Expect that there will be times when your mood is low and you may feel sad and hopeless. This is normal. Watch for the signs of depression and speak with your primary physician if you think you are depressed.
- **Build a support team and reach out.** Your medical team is not your only resource. Try joining a support group to talk about your concerns, problems and even things that are going well. By doing so you will not only be able to obtain additional information but you may be able to help someone else.
- **Gather information on local resources.** Many communities have agencies and services that can assist with managing day-to-day life. Some people with chronic conditions may need temporary assistance with transportation to the physician, help with the grocery shopping, errands or housekeeping, or even financial assistance paying for utilities. Being familiar with the agencies and services within your community will allow you to find and obtain assistance and additional support when it is needed.
- **Make those necessary lifestyle changes and be sure to include the entire family.** Lifestyle changes are never easy especially the ones that we feel "forced" to make because of a chronic condition. We all know those changes - changing your diet, quitting smoking, exercising, cutting out sugar. Studies have shown that individuals with chronic illness who make these changes are more likely to manage their illness successfully. Try including the family if at all possible. That way everyone will be adopting a healthier lifestyle.
- **Make those necessary legal and financial plans.** Discuss your situation with trusted individuals, legal counsel, and/or a financial advisor. These individuals can assist with plans that will best meet your individual needs. Doing this as early as possible will prevent additional stress during a crisis.

## Conclusion

Upon learning of your diagnosis, you may have assumed the worst. A chronic condition presents challenges you have not planned for or may never have expected, but don't forget that you are in charge. There are many positive things you can do to maintain your health. Talk with your physician, friends, and family. Learn all you can do and enjoy each day as it comes.

# Single Parenting: Finding Support

Whether by choice or circumstance, being a single parent comes with a unique set of challenges. To help tackle these challenges, build your own community and support network. Your network may be made up of friends, family members, neighbors, and others who enrich your and your family's life.

## What Do You Need?

First, identify the areas in your life where you need help. For many single parents, a single income means extra financial stress. Meeting work, family, and household demands on your own can leave you feeling short on time. When faced with multiple demands on your time, you might find it difficult to prioritize recreation, social connectedness, and self-care, which are all vital for your well-being. Make and prioritize a list of what you need: Help with carpools or childcare? Legal, professional advice or counseling? A listening ear and a compassionate shoulder?



It's okay to ask for help. Empower yourself with the resources, practical help, and emotional support you need by reaching out to those in your network. Think of all the people in your life and how they might help support you.

Also think about what you can offer to others. For example, if you're already going to the grocery store, could you shop for a neighbor in exchange for help in the yard? Or trade childcare with another family? Be creative and consider your strengths and how you like to spend your time. You might find help to meet your family's needs while enriching the life of someone else!

## Build Your Community

If your circle of support doesn't meet your needs, make an effort to create new relationships. If you're a homebody or shy, you might need to push yourself into social situations. Consider your personal interests

and those of your family. You might find a church or synagogue group, book group, or playgroup that are good options for meeting new friends and finding a sense of belonging. Keep in mind that meeting new people and social networking are skills that get better with practice.

## Support Groups

Support groups are a great way to meet new people and receive and provide support for others. They are also a good way to balance positive and negative feelings.

This kind of networking creates an environment of honest and objective people who are able to identify and acknowledge each other's experiences. Support groups provide a place to vent and relax as well as to learn practical advice for single parenting.

Support groups for single or divorced parents are present in nearly every community. Here are just a couple sites that can help you find support groups online and in your community:

- Single Parents Network. Visit [singleparentsnetwork.com](http://singleparentsnetwork.com)
- Parents Without Partners. Visit [parentswithoutpartners.org](http://parentswithoutpartners.org)

To find resources in your area for single parents:

- Contact the United Way for the county's listings of non-profit agencies and parenting organizations.
- Call local community colleges to learn about parenting programs.
- Check with your local library. Story times and library events can be great place to meet and network with other parents with children in the same age group as your own.
- Check out your local Parks and Recreation Department. Many offer parenting classes or networking opportunities such as parent and me playgroups, sports, or family recreation opportunities.
- Browse your local parenting magazine. Many major metropolitan areas have a local parenting magazine that advertises regional events, support groups, parenting meet-ups, classes, recreation and more.
- Check class listings at your local hospital. Hospitals, especially those with maternity and children's services, often offer a variety of parenting support groups and classes.

## Start Your Own Support Group

- Be selective when finding a group, and remember, if you don't find a group that suits you, create one. Follow these suggestions from Andrea Engber and

Leah Klungness's book *The Complete Single Mother*:

- Visit other groups to observe what you want to do differently and to see how the group is organized.
- Locate other single parents with like experiences or problems who might be interested in joining.
- Publicize your first meeting with community announcements.
- Plan a meeting agenda identifying the purpose of the group, membership, the meeting format, networks for communication, fundraising issues, and activities.
- Set up guidelines for group discussion and a process for facilitation.

Whether you rely on existing friendships and family relations or you find new support networks and friendships, explore options and find support in those who will listen and share experiences. With the right network of support, you can ease the challenge of single parenting to focus on the rewards of parenting.

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