

# Family and Friends' Guide to Recovery from Depression and Bipolar Disorder



Depression and Bipolar  
Support Alliance

[We've been there. We can help.](#)

**W**hen a friend or family member has an episode of depression or bipolar disorder (manic depression), you might be unsure about what you can do to help. You might wonder how you should treat the person. You may not want to talk about the person's illness, or feel guilty, angry or confused. All of these feelings are normal.

**There are ways you can help** friends or family members throughout their recovery while empowering them to make their own choices.

### Overcoming Stigma

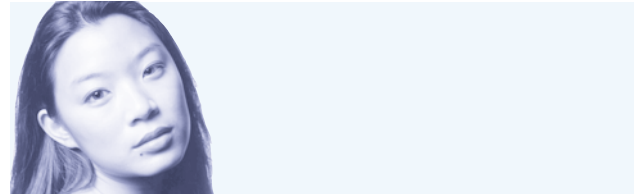
You and your loved one may have been told that depression and bipolar disorder are weaknesses or character flaws. This is not true. These illnesses are real and treatable, like diabetes or asthma. Your loved one may feel like he or she has failed. **Mental illness is not a failure and it is not anyone's fault.**

### The Five Stages of Recovery\*

It can be helpful to view recovery as a process with five stages. People go through these stages at different speeds. Recovery from an illness like depression or bipolar disorder, like the illness itself, has ups and downs. Friends and family who are supportive and dependable can make a big difference in a person's ability to cope within each of these stages.

1. Handling the Impact of the Illness
2. Feeling like Life is Limited
3. Realizing and Believing Change is Possible
4. Commitment to Change
5. Actions for Change

\* Developed by Ike Powell, The Empowerment Project.  
For information, visit [www.peersupport.org/selfdeterm.htm](http://www.peersupport.org/selfdeterm.htm)  
or e-mail [ikpwill@aol.com](mailto:ikpwill@aol.com)



### 1. Handling the Impact of the Illness:

*Being overwhelmed and confused by the illness.*

An episode of mania or depression, especially one that causes major problems with relationships, money, employment or other areas of life, can be devastating for everyone involved. A person who needs to be hospitalized may leave the hospital feeling confused, ashamed, overwhelmed, and unsure about what to do next.

#### What friends and family can do:

- Offer emotional support and understanding.
- Help with health care and other responsibilities.
- Offer to help them talk with or find health care providers.
- Keep brief notes of symptoms, treatment, progress, side effects and setbacks in a journal or Personal Calendar.
- Be patient and accepting.

Your loved one's illness is not your fault or theirs. It is a real illness that can be successfully treated. Resist the urge to try to fix everything all at once. Be supportive, but know that your loved one is ultimately responsible for his or her own treatment and lifestyle choices.



## 2. Feeling like Life is Limited:

*Believing life will never be the same.*

At this stage, people take a hard look at the ways their illness has affected their lives. They may not believe their lives can ever change or improve. It is important that friends, families and health care providers help by working to instill hope and rebuild a positive self-image.

### What friends and family can do:

- Believe in the person's ability to get well.
- Tell them they have the ability to get well with time and patience. Instill hope by focusing on their strengths.
- Work to separate the symptoms of the illness from the person's true personality. Help the person rebuild a positive self-image.
- Recognize when your loved one is having symptoms and realize that communication may be more difficult during these times. Know that symptoms such as social withdrawal come from the illness and are probably not a reaction to you.
- Do your best not to rush, pressure, hover or nag.

A mood disorder affects a person's attitude and beliefs. Hopelessness, lack of interest, anger, anxiety and impatience can all be symptoms of the illness.

Treatment helps people recognize and work to correct these types of distorted thoughts and feelings. Your support and acceptance are needed during this stage.



## 3. Realizing and Believing Change is Possible:

*Questioning the disabling power of the illness and believing life can be different.*

Hope is a powerful motivator in recovery. Plans, goals and belief in a better future can motivate people to work on day-to-day wellness. At this stage people begin to believe that life can be better and change is possible.

### What friends and family can do:

- Empower your loved one to participate in wellness by taking small steps toward a healthier lifestyle. This may include:
  - ✓ Sticking with the same sleep and wake times
  - ✓ Consistently getting good nutrition
  - ✓ Doing some sort of physical activity or exercise
  - ✓ Avoiding alcohol and substances
  - ✓ Finding a DBSA support group
  - ✓ Keeping health care appointments and staying with treatment
- Offer reassurance that the future can and will be different and better. Remind them they have the power to change.
- Help them identify things they want to change and things they want to accomplish.

Symptoms of depression and bipolar disorder may cause a hopeless, "what's the point?" attitude. This is also a symptom of the illness. With treatment, people can and will improve. To help loved ones move forward in recovery, help them identify negative things they are dissatisfied with and want to change, or positive things they would like to do. Help them work toward achieving these things.



#### 4. Commitment to Change:

*Exploring possibilities and challenging the disabling power of the illness.*

Depression and bipolar disorder are powerful illnesses, but they do not have to keep people from living fulfilling lives. At this stage, people experience a change in attitude. They become more aware of the possibilities in their lives and the choices that are open to them. They work to avoid feeling held back or defined by their illness. They actively work on the strategies they have identified to keep themselves well. It is helpful to focus on their strengths and the skills, resources and supports they need.

##### What friends and family can do:

- Help people identify:
  - ✓ Things they enjoy or feel passionate about
  - ✓ Ways they can bring those things into their lives
  - ✓ Things they are dissatisfied with and want to change
  - ✓ Ways they can change those things
  - ✓ Skills, strengths and ideas that can help them reach their goals
  - ✓ Resources that can help them build additional skills
- Help them figure out what keeps them well.
- Encourage and support their efforts.

The key is to take small steps. Many small steps will add up to big positive changes. Find small ways for them to get involved in things they care about. These can be activities they enjoy, or things they want to change, in their own lives or in the world.



#### 5. Actions for Change:

*Moving beyond the disabling power of the illness.*

At this stage, people turn words into actions by taking steps toward their goals. For some people, this may mean seeking full-time, part-time or volunteer work, for others it may mean changing a living situation or working on mental health advocacy or support.

##### What friends and family can do:

- Help your friends or family members to use the strengths and skills they have.
- Keep their expectations reachable and realistic without holding them back.
- Help them find additional resources and supports to help them reach their goals step-by-step.
- Continue to support them as they set new goals and focus on life beyond their illness.
- Help them identify and overcome negative or defeatist thinking.
- Encourage them to take it easy on themselves and enjoy the journey.

People with depression or bipolar disorder have the power to create the lives they want for themselves. When they work on recovery and are able to look beyond their illness, the possibilities are limitless.

### What You Can Say that Helps

- You are not alone in this. I'm here for you.
- I understand you have a real illness and that's what causes these thoughts and feelings.
- You may not believe it now, but the way you're feeling will change.
- I may not be able to understand exactly how you feel but I care about you and want to help.
- When you want to give up, tell yourself you will hold on for just one more day, hour, minute – whatever you can manage.
- You are important to me. Your life is important to me.
- Tell me what I can do now to help you.
- I am here for you. We will get through this together.

### Avoid Saying

- It's all in your head.
- We all go through times like this.
- You'll be fine. Stop worrying.
- Look on the bright side.
- You have so much to live for – why do you want to die?
- I can't do anything about your situation.
- Just snap out of it.
- Stop acting crazy.
- What's wrong with you?
- Shouldn't you be better by now?

### What to Find Out:

- Contact information (including emergency numbers) for your loved one's doctor, therapist, and psychiatrist, your local hospital, and trusted friends and family members who can help in a crisis.
- Whether you have permission to discuss your loved one's treatment with his or her doctors, and if not, what you need to do to get permission.
- The treatments and medications your loved one is receiving, any special dosage instructions and any needed changes in diet or activity.
- The most likely warning signs of a worsening manic or depressive episode (words and behaviors) and what you can do to help.
- What kind of day-to-day help you can offer, such as doing housework or grocery shopping.

When talking with your loved one's health care providers, be patient, polite and assertive. Ask for clarification of things you do not understand. Write things down that you need to remember.

## Helping and Getting Help

As a friend or family member you can provide the best support when you are taking care of yourself. It helps to talk to people who know how it feels to be in your situation. Talk with understanding friends or relatives, look for therapy of your own, or find a DBSA support group.

DBSA support groups are run by people, families and friends affected by depression or bipolar disorder. They are safe, confidential, free meetings where people can learn more about depression, bipolar disorder, and how to live with the illnesses.

One father of a daughter with bipolar disorder says, "DBSA support groups help take a lot of stress out of your life. As a family member, you have to be as prepared as possible, and accept that things will still happen that you aren't totally prepared for. Do all the research you can. Build a long list of dependable resources and support people, so when a situation arises, you know where to turn and how to take the next step. This really helped my family when we needed it."

A mother of a son with depression says, "When you are in the middle of a situation, it's hard to see what's happening, but when you sit in a support group meeting across from someone who is going through the same things, it gives you perspective."

Call DBSA at (800) 826-3632 or visit [www.DBSAlliance.org/findsupport.html](http://www.DBSAlliance.org/findsupport.html). If there is no group nearby, DBSA can help you start one.

## You are not alone.

Supporting a loved one with a mood disorder can be difficult, but you can have a positive impact on your loved one's wellness. Help your friend or family member get educated, find the best treatment and stick with a wellness plan. Get support for everyone involved, and never give up hope.

## Please help DBSA continue our education efforts.

Yes, I want to make a difference. Enclosed is my gift of:

\$100    \$50    \$20    Other \$ \_\_\_\_\_

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ COUNTRY \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

DAYTIME PHONE \_\_\_\_\_

E-MAIL \_\_\_\_\_

Check (payable to DBSA)    Money order  
 VISA    MasterCard    Discover    AmEx

ACCOUNT NUMBER \_\_\_\_\_ EXPIRATION DATE \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

- I wish my gift to remain anonymous.
- Please send me \_\_\_\_\_ donation envelopes to share.
- Please send me information on including DBSA in my will.
- I have enclosed my company's matching gift form.
- I'd like to receive more information about mood disorders.
- Please send all correspondence in a confidential envelope.

If you would like to make your gift a Memorial or Honorary tribute, please complete the following:

- In memory of/in honor of (circle one) \_\_\_\_\_ PRINT NAME
- Please notify the following recipient of my gift: \_\_\_\_\_

RECIPIENT'S NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ COUNTRY \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Please send this form with payment to: DBSA  
730 N. Franklin Street, Suite 501, Chicago, IL 60610-7224 USA

Questions? Call (800) 826-3632 or (312) 642-0049

Credit card payments may be faxed to (312) 642-7243

Secure online donations may be made at  
[www.DBSAlliance.org](http://www.DBSAlliance.org)

DBSA is a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) Illinois corporation. All donations are tax deductible based on federal and state IRS regulations. Consult your tax advisor for details. All information is held in strict confidence and will never be shared with other organizations. **Thank you for your gift!**

FAMREC05



We've been there.  
We can help.

Depression and Bipolar  
Support Alliance

**The Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA)** is the leading patient-directed national organization focusing on the most prevalent mental illnesses. The organization fosters an environment of understanding about the impact and management of these life-threatening illnesses by providing up-to-date, scientifically-based tools and information written in language the general public can understand. DBSA supports research to promote more timely diagnosis, develop more effective and tolerable treatments and discover a cure. The organization works to ensure that people living with mood disorders are treated equitably.

Assisted by a Scientific Advisory Board comprised of the leading researchers and clinicians in the field of mood disorders, DBSA has more than 1,000 peer-run support groups across the country. Over four million people request and receive information and assistance each year. DBSA's mission is to improve the lives of people living with mood disorders.

---

**Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance**

730 N. Franklin Street, Suite 501  
Chicago, Illinois 60610-7224 USA  
Phone: (800) 826-3632 or (312) 642-0049  
Fax: (312) 642-7243  
Website: [www.DBSAAlliance.org](http://www.DBSAAlliance.org)

Visit our updated, interactive website for important information, breaking news, chapter connections, advocacy help and much more.

---

Production of this brochure was made possible by an unrestricted educational grant from Abbott.

DBSA does not endorse or recommend the use of any specific treatments or medications for mood disorders. For advice about specific treatments or medications, individuals should consult their physicians and/or mental health professionals.