



Being a Support Partner

A Step-by-Step Guide to Understanding
Depression and Providing Support



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Introduction to Support Partners

Support Partners is an educational program dedicated to the up to 21 million Americans with depressive disorders, including major depression — and the people like you who care about them.

Why do people with depression need support?

Depression can make people feel isolated and alone, causing them to retreat from family, friends and loved ones. They may also feel hopeless at times, suddenly finding it difficult to do the things they once enjoyed, or took pride in doing well. Because depression can be a difficult topic to talk about, many people are reluctant to discuss it. For these reasons, having a Support Partner like you to

lean on and be honest with can make a world of difference in someone's life.

In addition to your support, it is vital for a person with depression to seek help from a healthcare professional and undergo the treatment that is best for him or her.

What is a Support Partner?

A Support Partner is someone who is committed to helping a friend or loved one with depression. As a Support Partner, you can be a cheerleader or confidant; you can provide the encouragement to help your Partner believe that he or she can recover from depression.

Support can be given in many different ways. You can define your role based on your schedule and your Partner's needs. Some people with depression may need a Support Partner to provide a safe haven for discussing the struggles, triumphs and setbacks of depression, while others may seek help with daily tasks. Anyone can act as

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Depression is a medical illness, like diabetes and heart disease, which needs treatment and help from a healthcare professional.

a Support Partner — family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, spiritual leaders, or other concerned individuals.

How do I use this guidebook?

The “Being a Support Partner” guidebook provides a step-by-step approach to forming a successful, supportive partnership to help your Partner manage depression, including recognizing the signs and symptoms, defining your role and tracking progress.

This guidebook is one of three Support Partners guidebooks included in your kit. “Managing Your Depression” was specifically created to help people with depression, and you should give a copy to your friend or loved one. However, we strongly encourage you both to read the “Shared Guidebook” together. This guidebook is designed to help you learn more about how people experience their depression. It also can help you find a healthcare professional, define a long-term wellness plan and provides additional resources for information.



STEP 1: Recognizing Depression

What is depression?

Depression is a medical illness with real causes; no one chooses to be depressed.

There are many theories about the cause of depression. One of the most commonly accepted theories suggests that two naturally occurring chemicals are believed to affect the core mood and pain symptoms of depression. Depression can cause people to see and experience the world differently and can deprive them of their hopes and dreams.

Depression is a medical illness, like diabetes and heart disease, which needs treatment and help from a healthcare professional. It

Depression can include a broad range of symptoms:

Emotional

- Sadness throughout the day, nearly every day
- Loss of interest in or enjoyment of favorite activities
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Excessive or inappropriate feelings of guilt
- Trouble making decisions
- Thoughts of death or suicide

Physical

- Fatigue or lack of energy
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Change in appetite or weight
- Complaints of pain
- Trouble concentrating
- Restlessness

Nobody should settle for feeling only slightly better.

can vary in severity and can be triggered by a single event or stress. It may be the result of a genetic predisposition or may have no apparent cause. It can be a recurring illness. Further, when symptoms don't go away completely, the risk of depression coming back increases — but getting well is definitely possible.

The goal of treatment

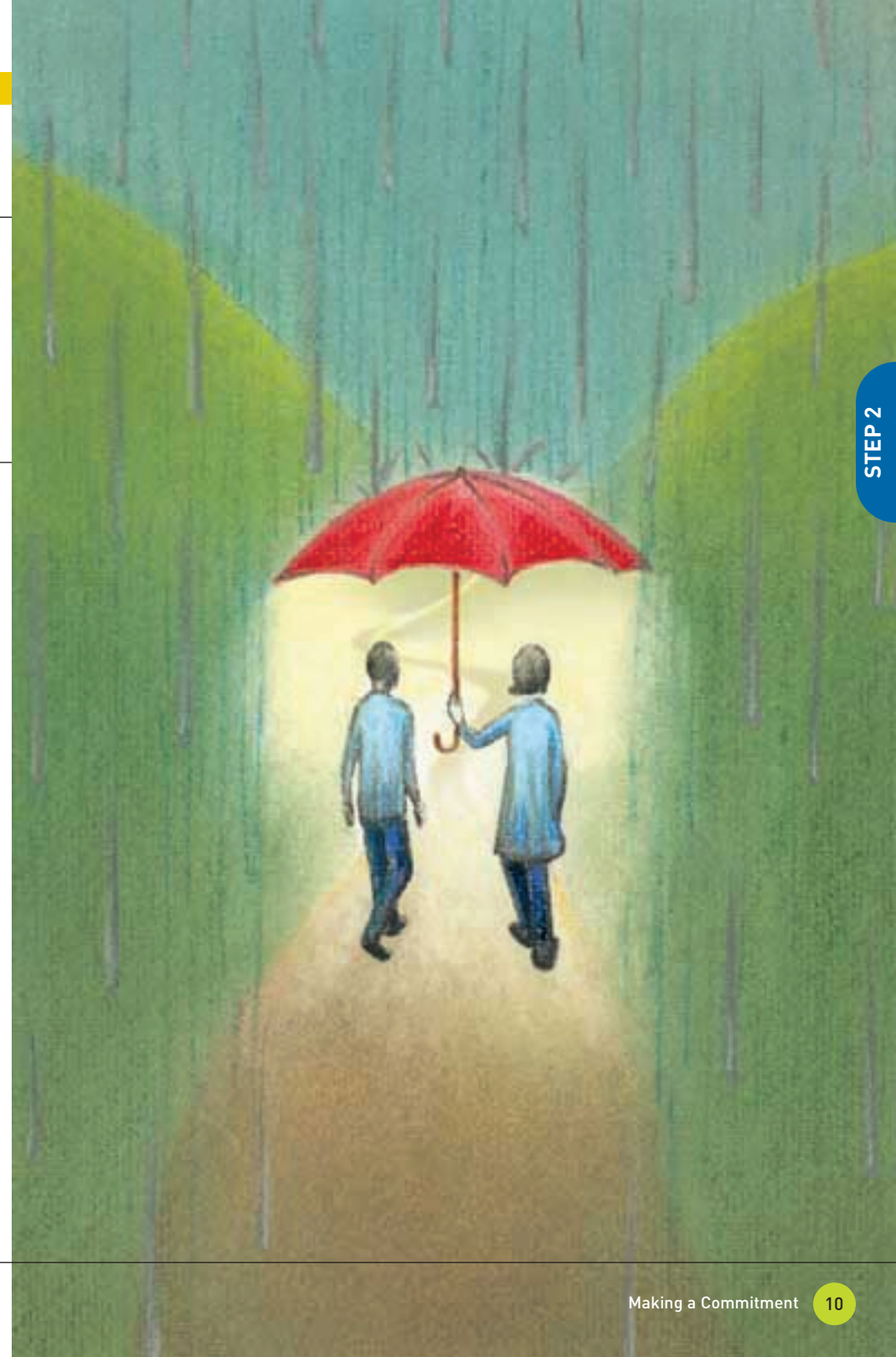
The goal of treatment is to help people with depression get back to feeling like themselves so they can move forward with their lives. Symptoms that don't go away completely can prevent people with depression from getting fully well and may increase the risk of symptoms returning. Nobody should settle for feeling only slightly better. Finding a qualified healthcare professional, staying with treatment, and accepting support from friends and family can keep a person with depression on the road to wellness.



STEP 2: Making a Commitment

Because it's difficult to watch someone you care about struggle with depression, your first instinct may be to rush in and fix it. While this is understandable, it is not the most helpful way to start. Real improvement will take time and can involve some setbacks, so you need to first give some thought to the level of commitment you can make. This information can be used to help set limits and appropriate expectations with your Partner, and will lay a strong foundation for success.

If you feel you don't have a lot of time to devote, or if your life or work prevents you from becoming as involved as you'd like to



be, that's okay. Sometimes just being there to talk once in awhile is support enough. Remember, any level of help is welcome.

Determine Your Time Commitment

Before approaching the person with depression to offer support, consider the following:

1. How much time do I have after family, work or other obligations?
2. How much time will my Partner need?
3. Can I sustain this relationship over time?
4. What kind of support can I give?
5. Think about your reasons for becoming a Support Partner, to ensure that this experience will be positive for you.

All in the family

If you are living with someone with depression, the question is not if you have time to commit, but rather how best to help. It is important to give some thought to understanding depression and how it is affecting your relationship. By doing this, you will gain insight into the areas where he or she may need the most support. Understanding your strengths and weaknesses will enable you to determine if support from others is also needed. Remember, working together is the goal.

Pinpoint your strengths

Providing support to a person with depression should not be all-consuming. Some people may need help tackling the daily demands of life, while others may need a friend to lean on emotionally for support. Regardless of the task — big or small — your help can reduce feelings of isolation, so that feeling better seems within reach.

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STEP 2

When discussing depression, the key to a successful conversation is showing your concern and compassion — without passing judgment.

Before you can help, you need to understand your strengths and shortfalls. For example, if you have a strong take-charge personality, not being able to “fix” things quickly may become frustrating for you. Therefore, you may need to focus on helping in ways that are more appropriate. Apply your take-charge personality to assist your Partner with everyday tasks like grocery shopping or picking children up from school. If you’re a problem solver, you may be well suited to help your Partner complete insurance forms and understand his or her coverage. Or perhaps you’re a good listener; you may be a wonderful emotional support for your loved one.

You can use these examples to help you make a list of your own skills and how they can best be used. By defining your strengths now, you can have a useful conversation with your Partner later about how you can help.

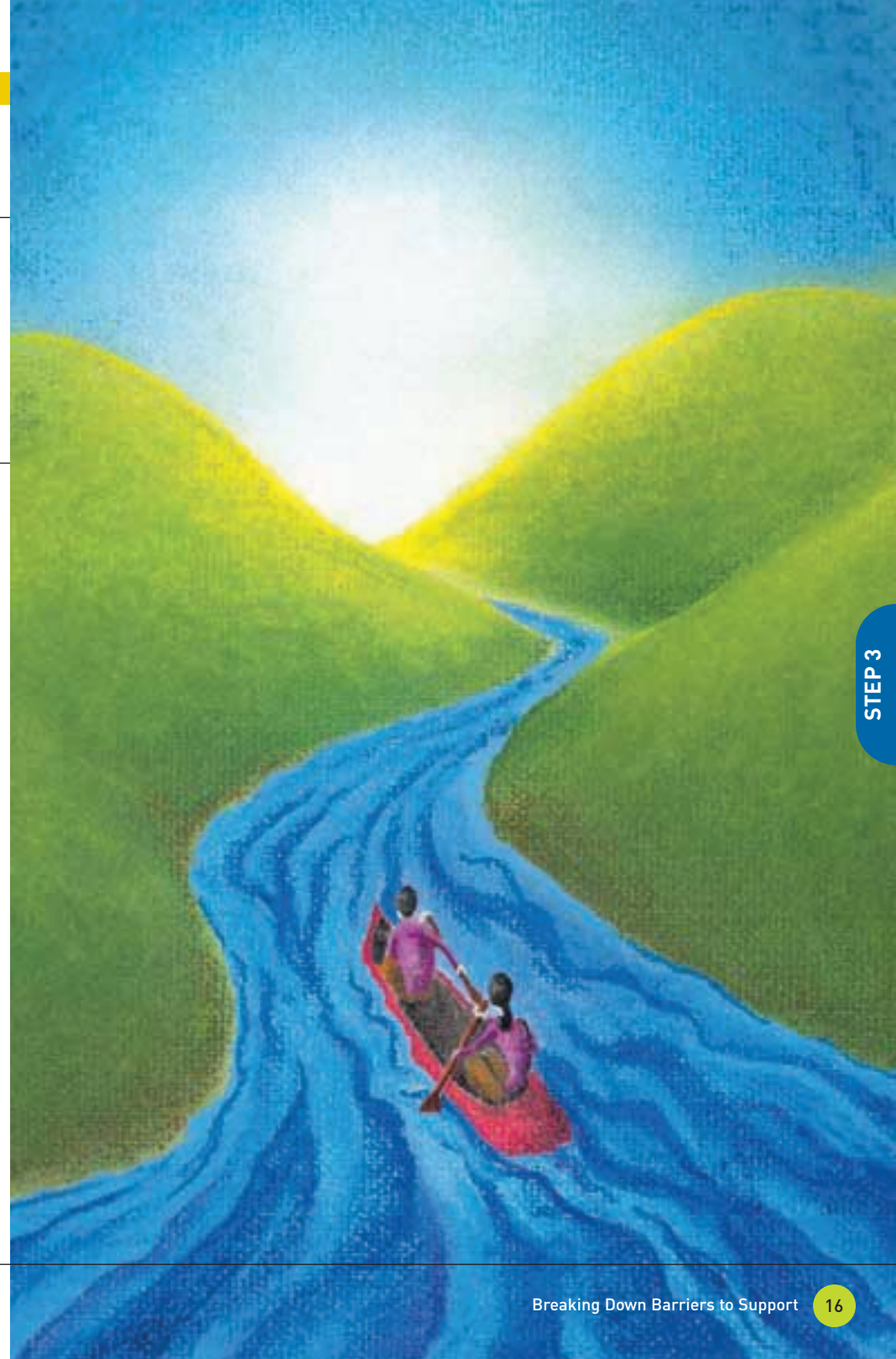


STEP 3: Breaking Down Barriers to Support

Finding the words to offer your help can be a delicate subject for many people. Whether the person you care about has been diagnosed, or you just suspect your loved one may have depression, starting a conversation doesn't have to be difficult or embarrassing. In fact, you may be surprised to find the person is relieved to finally confide in someone.

Setting the stage

We all understand the power of good atmosphere. It's easier to discuss a difficult topic when we are relaxed and comfortable, rather than when we are feeling stressed or pressured. Don't be afraid to offer your



STEP 3

The person you care about may not be ready to discuss depression. It may take a few attempts before any meaningful conversation can take place.

support; just choose the right moment, such as:

- A weekend or evening visit
- At lunch, away from work
- Over coffee
- During a walk together

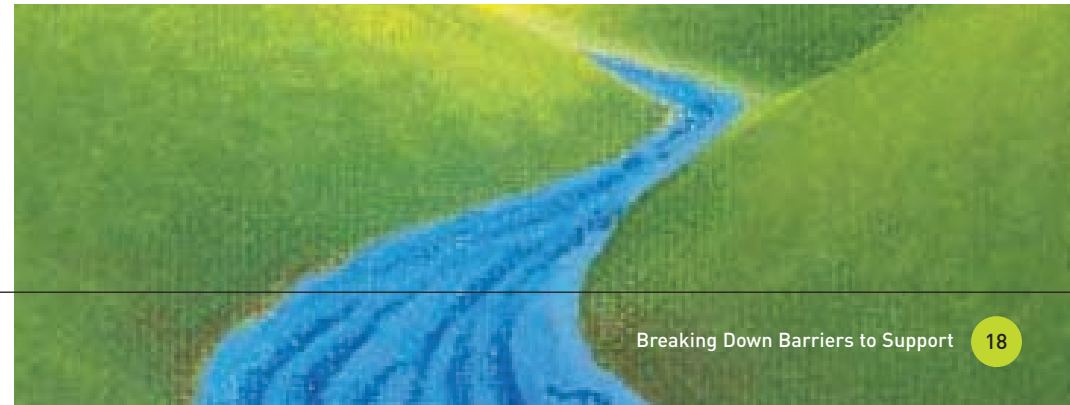
Ready, set . . . start talking!

When discussing depression, the key to a successful conversation is showing your concern and compassion — without passing judgment. Don't point to a person's past mistakes to start the discussion; this will likely lead to defensiveness. Avoid negative language and asking "why." For example, rather than saying, "Why can't you just snap out of it?" you should say, "What do you think has been making you depressed?" Be aware that the person you care about may not be ready to discuss depression, or may feel embarrassed. For some, it may take a few attempts before any meaningful conversation can take place. In the meantime, you are showing that you care.

Breaking the ice

What to say if a person has already told you about his or her diagnosis:

- "I've been looking into depression after you mentioned that you had been diagnosed, and if you decide you'd like some help, you don't have to go through this alone."
- "Has your healthcare provider recommended that you set some goals? If so, can I work with you to develop a plan that will help you get back to feeling like yourself again?"
- "It's great that your healthcare professional has prescribed a treatment for your depression, but what about the little things that are still stressing you out? I'm here if you need anything."



The most important thing is that you encourage the person to seek help from, or continue to see, a healthcare professional.

- “If your depression makes doing things seem impossible, when they used to come easily, I’m here to help you with whatever you need.”

What to say if you suspect depression:

- “Have you noticed you haven’t been yourself lately? Have you thought about going to see a medical professional? I can go with you, if you’re feeling nervous.”
- “Do you think a healthcare professional will be able to help you get back to feeling like yourself? Will you let me help you find one?”
- “It seems like you’ve been having a hard time with things lately. Have you thought about seeking professional help? You don’t have to go through this on your own.”

If at first you don’t succeed

Many people find it difficult to accept help. Your offer may be refused for a number of

reasons — shame, feelings of worthlessness or fear of losing independence. If this happens, don’t worry. The time isn’t right for the person to accept your support. Don’t push it at that moment. Instead, gently persist over time. In this situation, the most important thing is that you encourage the person to seek help from, or continue to see, a healthcare professional. Remember, although it takes time to change course, with the right help, real improvement is possible.



STEP 4: Building a Network of Support

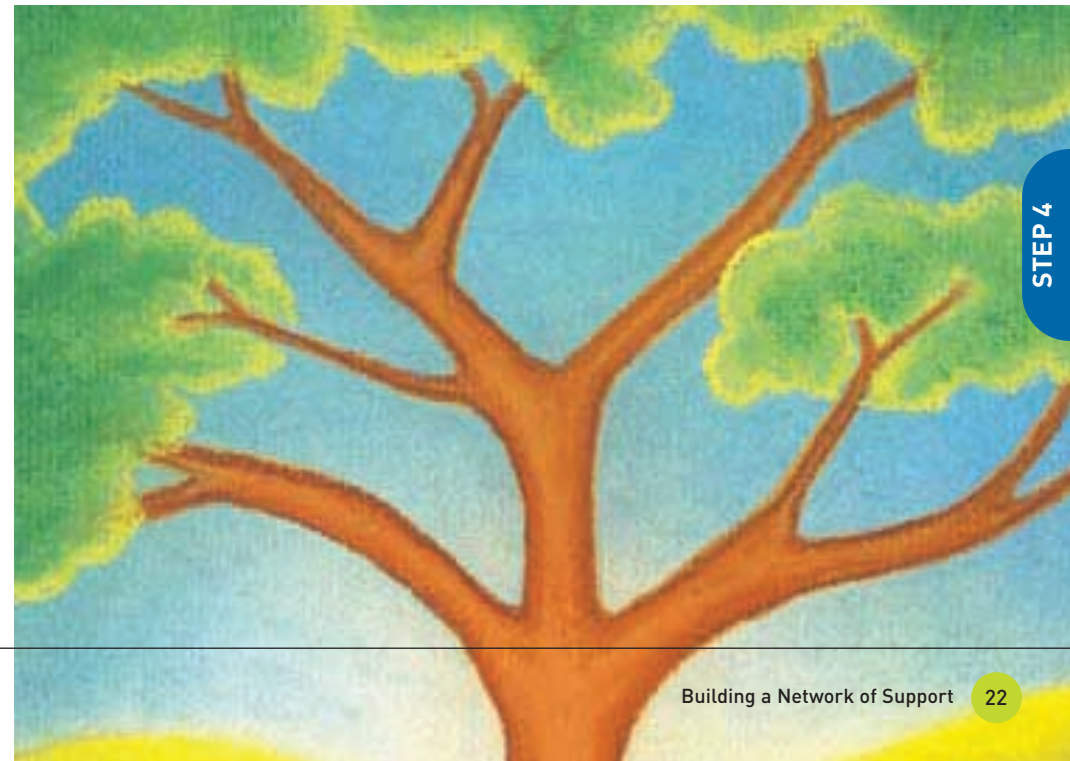
Although we value our independence, depression can make the simplest of tasks seem overwhelming. Unfortunately, asking for help is often seen as a sign of failure, and can become an obstacle to feeling better.

As a Support Partner, you have the power to help change this.

Encourage seeking professional help

One of the most important things a Support Partner can do is encourage the person with depression to seek out, and stick with, professional medical help. If he or she is

already in treatment, you can encourage him or her to stay with it, and to be open with their healthcare provider about their symptoms, their progress and any setbacks. If a healthcare professional has not been contacted, remind your Partner that with the right treatment, it will be easier to reclaim his or her life. For tips on how to find a healthcare professional in your area and suggested questions to ask a healthcare provider, refer to the “Shared Guidebook” included in your kit.



Map out a game plan

In "Step 2: Making a Commitment," you determined your level of commitment and skill set. Now you can make a plan.

The first step is to ask your Partner about the type of help he or she needs. At first, your Partner may not know or may be reluctant to tell you. Don't give up. Instead, offer specific examples of how you can offer emotional or practical support. To decide the type of support needed, look at the chart on the opposite page with your Support Partner. You may also want to use the extra space for any specific needs he or she may have.

STEP 4



Offering Support

Emotional Support

- Call every evening to check in
- Meet once a week
- Help identify the broad range of depression symptoms, as well as triggers
- Encourage Partner to stick with treatment
- Help Partner recognize his or her progress
- Help set realistic short-term goals, if suggested by Partner's healthcare provider
- Encourage Partner to be as active as possible
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Practical Support

- Make an appointment with a healthcare professional
- Pick children up from school or after-school activities
- Help with healthcare paperwork
- Cook dinner once a week
- Drive Partner to doctor's appointments
- Run errands
- Arrange a time to walk or go to the gym together
- Make a date to go to the movies
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

STEP 4

Remind your Partner that with the right treatment, it will be easier to reclaim his or her life.

Now that you know your Partner's needs, the next step is to make a schedule for yourself. For example, commit to calling every evening to talk or to picking up the kids from soccer practice. By eliminating the need for your Partner to routinely ask for assistance, you enable him or her to focus on becoming well.

Setting future goals

If your Partner identifies practical support as a need, be sure that your help does not delay your Partner's progress. While your Partner will value your help, taking on too many of his or her responsibilities in the long run will not be helpful to your Partner.

Remember, your role as a Support Partner is to encourage and support. Take each opportunity to build on your Partner's strengths by encouraging him or her to take action. For example, if you have committed yourself to cooking dinner for your Partner every Thursday, you can identify "cooking together" as a long-term goal. Check in with

your Partner occasionally about his or her capabilities and keep him or her motivated to achieve his or her goals each step of the way.

Organize a Support Partner team

If your Partner is living with moderate to severe depression, he or she may need more help than you can offer. You and your Partner may want to discuss forming a Support Partner team. If you feel this is an appropriate route, talk it over with your Partner to ensure that he or she is comfortable involving other people.

Once you've agreed to involve others, your Partner should first identify other potential members. You should share this guidebook with other Support Partners and encourage them to think about "Step 2: Making a Commitment." If it is okay with your Partner, the team should communicate regularly about how you all can best work together and share the responsibilities.

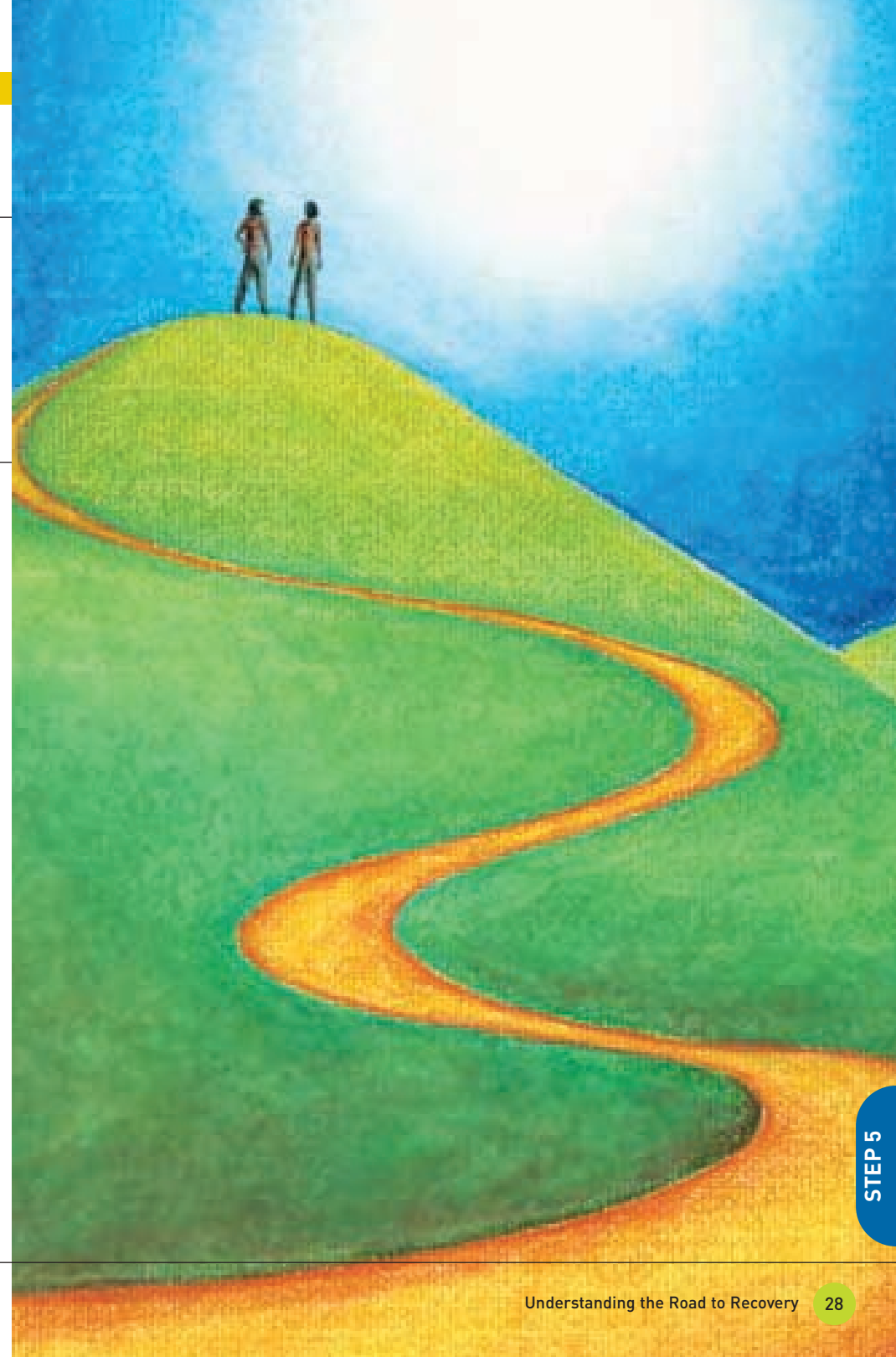
Take each opportunity to build on your Partner's strengths by encouraging him or her to take action.

STEP 5: Understanding the Road to Recovery

For a person with depression, the road to recovery can be a long and difficult one. In spite of your and your loved one's best efforts, depression can be a recurring disease and setbacks may happen. But, you can play an important role in helping your Partner stay motivated.

Mapping out a wellness plan

One of the best things you can do for your Partner is to help him or her define and realize recovery goals. Your encouragement and coaching can be essential to the success of this plan.



In addition to seeking treatment from a healthcare professional, it may be helpful for you and your Partner to go through the following exercise:

A Comprehensive Wellness Plan Will:

- Define goals (if goal-setting is approved by your Partner's healthcare provider)
- Identify triggers or specific events that may cause depression to worsen
- Outline strategies that can be used to move beyond the illness
- Develop a list of early warning signs that may signal a relapse

To create a wellness plan, see the "Shared Guidebook" for ways to get started and specific examples.

Tracking progress

For someone with depression, it can be difficult to recognize the daily improvements that indicate progress is being made. Give

your Partner perspective on his or her progress; take notice that their goals are being met, and celebrate this achievement with them. Call out each sign of improvement, no matter how small, by saying things like:

- "I haven't heard you laugh so much in a long time."
- "You seem a lot more relaxed, lately."
- "You've started gardening again."
- "You seem to be more involved with projects at work."

Keep in mind that it can be disheartening if your Partner's goals are not met right away. Focus on small goals at first and wait to tackle larger goals until he or she is feeling better. Your Partner may be disappointed, so watch out for any negative talk about him or herself. This is a barrier to wellness, and you should encourage your Partner to try to avoid it.

As you go through the stages of depression with your Partner, keep in mind that each person experiences depression (and getting

One of the best things you can do for your Partner is to help him or her define and realize recovery goals.

Call out each sign of improvement, no matter how small.

better) differently, and his or her needs may change over time. To keep in step with these changes, keep communicating.

The link between depression and suicide

As someone concerned about a person with depression, it's important that you understand the relationship between depression and suicide. Not all people with depression have suicidal thoughts, and not all suicidal thoughts lead to suicide, but depression-related suicide is a reality. Try not to let the fear of facing this difficult situation discourage you from helping. To determine if someone is having thoughts of suicide, try asking:

- "Are you thinking about hurting yourself?"
- "Are you thinking about giving up?"
- "Do you need help to keep yourself safe?"

If his or her answer is "yes" to any of these questions, it is important that you help your Partner **seek professional help immediately**.



You must have your Partner call their doctor right away. If your Partner is unable to make this call, you should contact his or her healthcare professional. Be aware that a physician can only speak with you if you believe your Partner is suicidal, so be clear about the reasons for your call and tell him or her your Partner's name. Additionally, you can take him or her to the nearest emergency room, or call 911 or the national suicide hotline, 1-800-SUICIDE.

Your active support can be a crucial factor that helps your Partner enjoy life to the fullest.

Although you will be relieved if the answers to your questions about suicide are “no,” you should be aware that throughout the course of the illness a person’s symptoms may worsen or thoughts of suicide may emerge. Continue to watch for these signs as well as anxiety, agitation, panic, difficulty sleeping, irritability, hostility, aggressiveness, impulsivity, restlessness, or overexcitement and hyperactivity. If any of these changes are severe or occur suddenly, it could signal an increased risk of suicidal thinking or behavior. Be especially observant when he or she is starting any antidepressant therapy and whenever there is a change in dose.

See the “Shared Guidebook” to learn more about where to find help from advocacy and support groups, as well as mental health agencies.

Take care of yourself

Supporting someone with a serious medical illness like depression can be very tough.

Although there is a great chance your Partner will start to feel better with treatment, you may find things slow going at first. The ups and downs of living with depression can be very draining on you, as well as on your Partner, so it’s important that you take care of yourself. Make sure you do whatever makes you feel good, such as:

- Take time out to treat yourself to a movie
- Spend time with other people you care about
- Take time off, if you need to
- Keep your own goals on track (exercise, painting class)
- Keep a journal of your feelings

As a Support Partner, you are invaluable to your friend or loved one who is struggling with depression. You have chosen to take on an important task. It can be a long journey for both of you, but your active support can be a crucial factor that helps your Partner enjoy life to the fullest.



For more information, visit
www.SupportPartnersProgram.com



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