

# HOPE

A Guidebook for Preventing  
and Managing Depression

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Dear Reader,

My name is Diane Lasher-Penti. I am a licensed marriage and family therapist and the Town of Ellington Youth Services Director. I have worked with children and adolescents in our community for over 15 years.

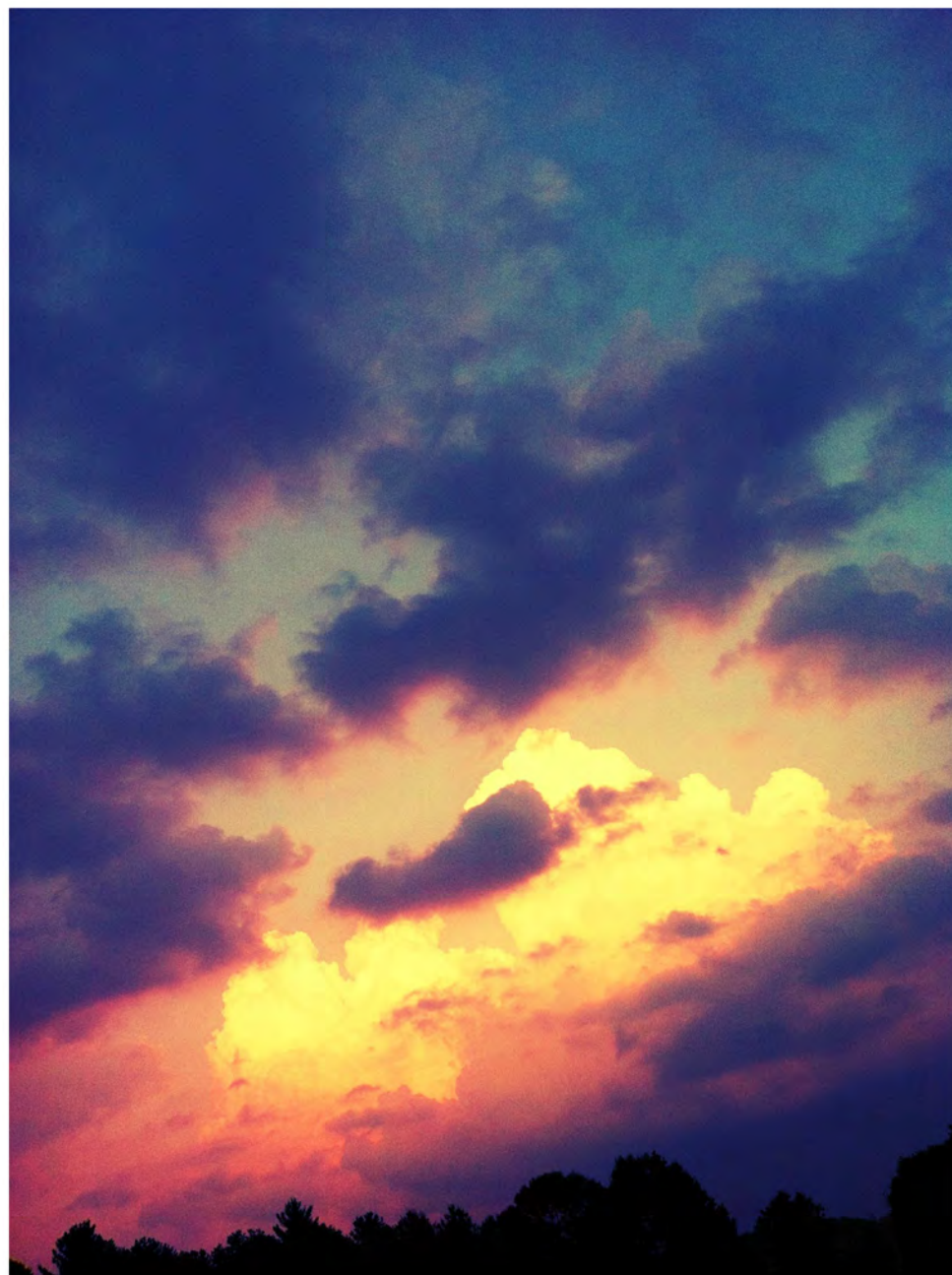
I created this book with the goal of helping you identify, prevent, and manage symptoms of depression you might experience at different times in your life.

In this book, you will find a general overview of what depression is, its causes, risk factors, and the different ways it can manifest, tools and techniques for preventing and managing depression, and resources should you wish to seek additional help on your mental health journey.

This book is neither meant to replace traditional counseling or therapy, nor to serve as a cure-all for a complex mood disorder. Rather, I've put this together in hopes that, should you identify with any of the examples or scenarios you encounter within these pages, you leave feeling empowered—and well-equipped—to make lifestyle changes and seek help as needed.

I believe in you. I am with you. Thank you for being here with me.

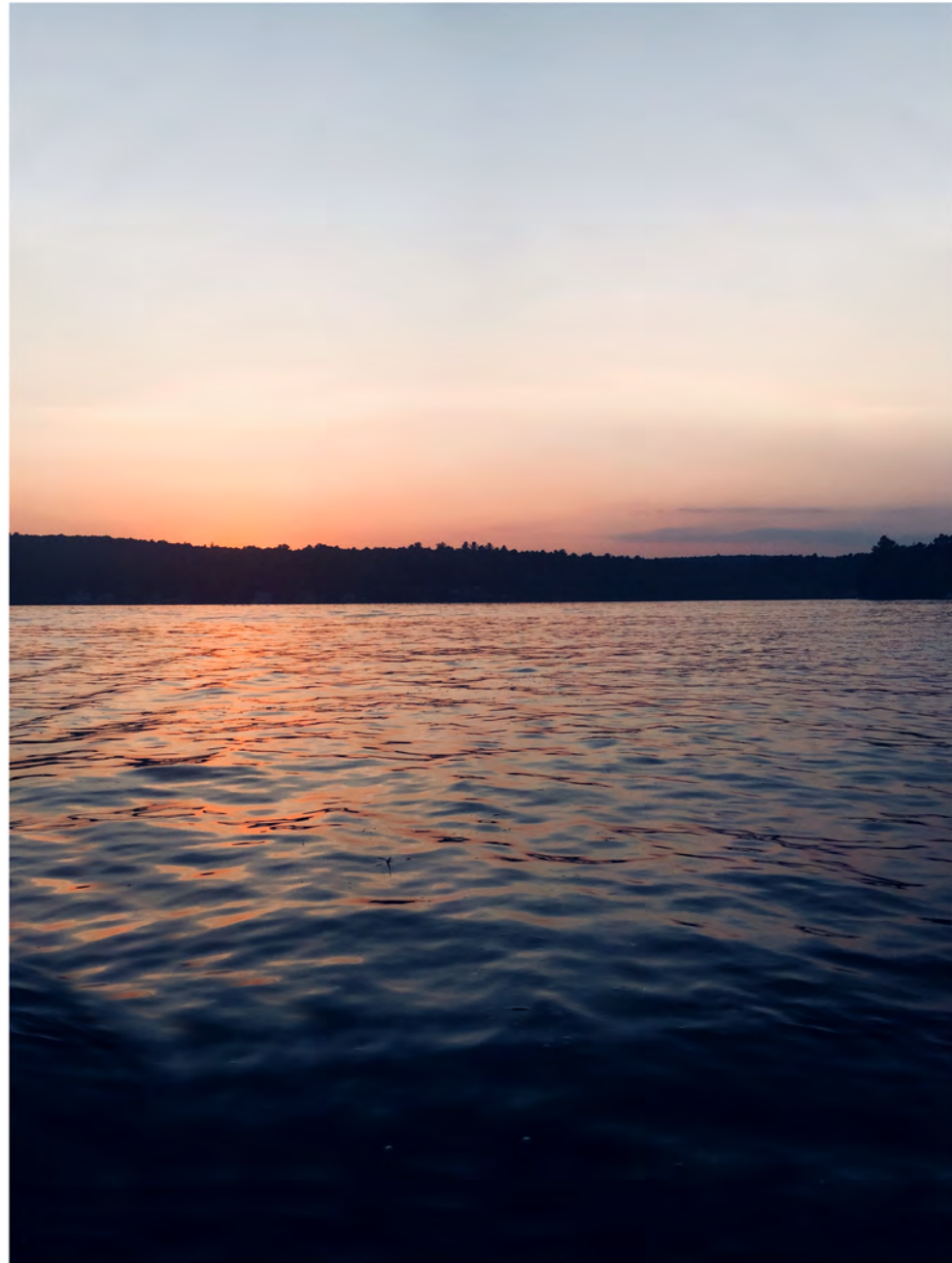
Diane Lasher-Penti, LMFT  
Youth Services Director



## Wherever You Are, It's Ok.

We all go through periods in our lives when we feel deeply sad or down. Chances are, if you're reading this book, you might be feeling that way now. You might have felt that way in the past, know you might feel that way in the future, or have a loved one you're concerned might be feeling that way as well. That's ok. In fact, it's normal, and I'm glad you are here. Being here means we can work together to help you make sense of your feelings and figure out how to best navigate life in the face of them.

It's important to know whether you are dealing with normal sadness or with something more serious like depression, there is help and there is hope. Our hope is this book will serve as a guide to get you started on the path toward both.



## What is Depression?

Depression is a common and serious mood disorder that causes persistent feelings of sadness, lack of physical and emotional energy, and a loss of interest in daily activities—even in those you once found enjoyable.

Depression is more than just a bout of the blues. Whereas “normal” sadness—the sadness you might feel when you perform poorly on a test, experience a break-up, or lose someone close to you—passes in a reasonable amount of time, depression persists. It affects the way you feel, think, and behave, and can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems.

Depression can be mild, moderate, or severe, and treatment options vary accordingly.

It’s important for you to learn about depression—its causes, risk factors, and the different ways it might manifest—so you can identify, manage, and combat any symptoms you might experience at any point in your life. This book is designed to help you do that.

First, let’s take a look at some causes and risk factors.

## Causes and Risk Factors

Researchers don't know exactly what causes depression. They do know, however, depression is influenced by different factors in our brains and bodies. Depression can be caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain, irregularities in brain structure and function, disturbances in neural circuitry, genetic vulnerability, hormones, and various life stressors and events.

Factors that seem to increase the risk of developing or triggering depression include:

- traumatic or stressful events, such as physical or sexual abuse, the death or loss of a loved one, difficult relationships, financial problems, and major life transitions.
- blood relatives with, or a personal history of, mental health disorders.
- being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender in an unsupportive situation.
- negative family or social environments in which poverty, hunger, emotional or physical abuse, violence, instability, and/or neglect are prevalent.
- certain personality traits like perfectionism, low self-esteem, dependency, or pessimism.
- abuse of alcohol and/or recreational drugs.
- serious or chronic illnesses like cancer, chronic pain, stroke, heart disease, and diabetes.
- various medications, such as sleeping pills or high blood pressure medication.





# Symptoms

Depression manifests in many different ways. It is important for you to recognize potential symptoms so you can better manage them and seek proper treatment.

The following symptoms may indicate depression, particularly when they last for more than a few weeks or interfere with your daily life:

**SYMPTOMS**

- body pains
- exhaustion
- changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- withdrawal from friends and activities
- difficultly making decisions
- lack of focus
- poor performance in school
- forgetfulness
- sadness or hopelessness
- constant boredom
- trouble sleeping
- lack of enthusiasm, energy, or motivation
- strong feelings of guilt and shame
- increased anger or rage
- withdrawal from friends and activities
- frequent crying

# Preventing and Managing Depression

Now that you have a basic understanding of depression, let's discuss what you can do to prevent and manage it. We'll start by discussing some healthy habits you can implement into your daily routine.

## Eating Well

Food is fuel. What you eat and drink directly impacts your brain and body. While your diet doesn't necessarily cause depression, it does affect the way you feel and function, so it's important to pay attention to what you are consuming. Studies have shown a healthy diet can improve mood and may decrease and potentially eliminate the need for medication.

Remember to include plenty of whole grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes, raw, unsalted nuts, lean red meats, chicken, fish, eggs, and olive oil.

A healthy diet includes foods high in iron, zinc, and vitamin B12. It's also rich in antioxidants that prevent cell damage, "smart" carbs like potatoes and squash that have a calming effect on the brain, and protein-rich foods that boost alertness.

Try to avoid sweets, refined cereals, fried food, and processed meat. Limit sugar-sweetened beverages to two per week. These foods put your blood sugar, insulin, hormones, and neurotransmitters on a dangerous, invisible roller coaster. This destabilizes mood and increases risk for insulin resistance.

If you eat a well-balanced diet, your brain and body will be happier and healthier, and you will flourish.





## Getting Enough Sleep

Sleep plays a vital role in your mental and physical health. It gives your body's cells and neurons a chance to shut down and repair themselves. Sleep deprivation acts as a chronic stressor that impairs brain function and contributes to an overload on the body's system. This can lead to depression. Ideally, you should aim for seven to nine hours of sleep each night to help both prevent and manage your depression.

Here are some techniques you can implement to help you meet that goal:

- Set a sleep schedule.
- Eliminate napping from your daily routine.
- Power down electronics an hour before bed.
- Set a bedtime alarm.
- Exercise in the morning as opposed to late at night.
- Eat dinner a few hours before bed.
- Avoid caffeine, drugs, and alcohol.
- Create a relaxing bedtime routine.
- Make your bedroom a sanctuary.
- Write down your thoughts and feelings.
- Try lavender or chamomile aromatherapy.





## Staying Active

Exercise is as important to mental health as it is to physical health. This is the case for everyone, but especially for those of us who deal with depression. Exercise has been proven to have mood-boosting effects. You should aim to exercise at least twenty minutes per day, even if exercise isn't your favorite activity or if you are busy, exhausted, or feeling down. The key is to find something you enjoy doing that gets you moving.

Here are some examples of exercises you can try:

- Riding a Bike
- Walking
- Yoga
- Martial Arts
- Strength Training
- Dancing
- Running
- Playing Sports
- Hiking



# Practicing Mindfulness and Gratitude

When you are feeling depressed, you might notice you tend to hyperfixate on negative thoughts and feelings. Depression hijacks your attention, causing you to focus on thoughts and feelings that reflect your current mood. This means when you are sad or depressed, you are more likely to remember the bad things that have happened and forget the good. This can drive you into a downward spiral. Practicing mindfulness may prevent or break that spiral.

## What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a fancy word for paying attention. It means being fully engaged in the present and reconnecting with your immediate experience—the sensations in your brain and body as well as those in the world around you. It can be as simple as noticing the cold air while you take a deep breath, smelling the salt from the ocean as you walk on the beach, or feeling the suds on your skin while you wash dishes. Mindfulness also means observing and accepting your thoughts and feelings without reacting to them.

There are many exercises and activities available to help you practice mindfulness every day. Here's one simple mindfulness exercise to get you started:

1. Make a list of five activities you engage in everyday, particularly those you do without thinking about them: taking a shower, eating dinner, doing the dishes, or driving to and from school or work.
2. Each day, focus on a different activity. You are not going to change what you do, but you are going to change the way you experience it. When doing each activity, try using all of your senses to fully immerse yourself rather than letting your mind run aimlessly or rushing on to your next activity. For example, while folding the clothes, you might pay attention to the different fabric textures on your hands or the smell of the freshly-cleaned laundry.
3. At the end of the week, reflect on how mindfulness changed your experience of the activity. If you find mindfulness helped you feel more present, awake, and alive in your everyday life, you might benefit from implementing this exercise more regularly.



## Gratitude

When you're mindful, you'll likely find you are more able to appreciate the small joys in life and be grateful for them.

Because gratitude increases levels of dopamine and serotonin, our "feel-good" neurotransmitters, it has been linked to lower rates of depression and helps buffer against future depressive episodes.

Here is a simple gratitude practice for you to try:

Each night for the next week, before you go to bed, take a few minutes and write down three things you are most grateful that you experienced that day.

These can be big or small—as simple as your morning cup of coffee or as grand as a surprise visit from your childhood best friend.

At the end of the week, reflect on how doing this exercise might have changed your outlook. If you find you were more aware of the good things in your life, you might benefit from continuing this practice.



## Establishing a Support System

It's important to establish a support system of people you love and trust with whom you can share your innermost feelings and process your experiences in a healthy way.

It may seem easier and more natural to isolate yourself during tough times, but supportive people can act as safety nets to hold you up emotionally and help guide you through the turbulence.

A support system looks different for each of us. It may consist of your family members, friends, counselors, coaches, mentors, or any other individuals you feel safe with. It is especially important to reach out to others when you are feeling alone, helpless, or without hope.



*I am brave.*

## Practicing Positive Self-Affirmations

The stories we tell ourselves become the frames through which we see ourselves and our worlds and impact how we navigate our lives.

When we are struggling with depression, we might find ourselves becoming more self-critical and believing, for example, that we are burdensome or worthless.

We know this isn't true, but sometimes we get hung up on negative self-talk. The good news is we have the power to change the way we speak to and about ourselves.

Try making a list of positive "I" statements to repeat to yourself on a daily basis. You can do this when you wake up, when you look in the mirror, when you're driving, when you're waiting to be served at a restaurant, or at any other time of the day.

Examples of positive "I" statements include:

*I am beautiful.*

*I am aware of my needs.*

*I am worthy of joy.*

*I can handle this.*

*I am loved.*



## Coping During Difficult Times

No matter how emotionally and physically healthy we are, we will all experience periods of difficulty in our lives. Let's look at some of the most common challenges we may encounter.

### Loss and Change

The nature of life is change. This means we all experience loss throughout our lives. Some periods of our lives will contain more losses than others, and some of these losses will be significant. We might lose a pet or a family member, move out of our childhood home, or experience a break-up.

It is normal and important for us to grieve these losses in our own ways, at our own times. People have unique ways of expressing emotions. You might express yours by doing rather than talking. You may feel better going on a walk or swimming, or by engaging in a creative activity like writing or painting. It may be more helpful for you to talk with family and friends about the loss.

No matter how you decide to express your emotions, remind yourself that things will eventually get better. Encourage yourself to participate in activities that have brought you joy in the past and to try new experiences that might get you out of a rut.

Grief is a process of letting go and learning to accept and live with loss. The amount of time it takes to do this varies with each person. Grief demands the strength to re-envision your life and move forward in the face of loss. This isn't always easy to do, and it is important to ask for help if you are feeling stuck in the process.



## Rejection

We all experience rejection at some point in our lives. We may get denied by our top college, may get cut from the basketball team, or may confess our feelings to someone we love and find the feelings are not reciprocated.

Whatever the case, the rejection might leave us feeling down about ourselves and our lives. Learning to view rejection objectively helps us realize we don't have to feel depressed and gives us the courage to try again.

Here are five ways to re-frame your experience of rejection:

### 1. Acknowledge and be honest with yourself about your emotions.

Rejection hurts. It might be easier to convince yourself—or someone else—it was "no big deal," but that will only prolong your pain. The best way to deal with uncomfortable emotions is to face them head on.

### 2. View rejection as evidence you are taking risks.

It took courage to apply to your "reach" school and to try out for a sport you've only played for one year. Rejection means you're trying new things and taking risks. If you never get rejected, you may be living too far inside your comfort zone.

### 3. Treat yourself with compassion.

Avoid negative self-talk with a kinder, more affirming message. Allow yourself to feel your feelings. It's okay to cry. I promise.

### 4. Refuse to let the rejection define who you are.

One person's opinion or one single incident should never define who you are. Don't let your self-worth depend upon other people's opinions of you. Just because someone else thinks something about you doesn't mean it's true. Remember, you decide your own truth.

### 5. Learn from rejection.

Look at the rejection objectively. *What does this mean? How can I improve? Is this an area I want to improve in or would I rather put my energy elsewhere?* Use rejection as an opportunity to move forward with intention and wisdom.



## Problem Solving

Conflict arises in all our lives. We may get in a fight with our best friend, we may forget to pay the rent, or our car might break down on the way to an important meeting. These problems might leave us feeling overwhelmed, and if we don't take action to solve them, we could end up feeling depressed. And when we are depressed, problems can feel even more insurmountable. It becomes a vicious cycle.

If you are well-equipped with problem-solving skills, you can put them to work when the challenges arise.

Here's a five-step plan for problem-solving:

1. Stop. Breathe. Clearly define the problem.
2. Brainstorm solutions for solving the problem.  
*What do I need to do? Do I need help from others?*
3. Choose a solution and create an action plan.
4. Take action.
5. Evaluate the plan.  
*Do I need to try another solution? Did any other problems arise? What should I do the next time to improve the outcome?*





## Handling the Winter Blues

Some people suffer from a condition called Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) and become depressed during the darker winter months. A milder form of SAD is often referred to as the “winter blues.”

### What causes SAD?

Melatonin, a chemical related to sleep, is produced when it is dark. Serotonin, a chemical related to feeling good, is produced when it is light. During winter months, some people produce such an overabundance of melatonin and small amount of serotonin that they end up feeling depressed.

If you find yourself experiencing symptoms of SAD or the winter blues, you can help yourself in the following ways:

- Try phototherapy. Exposure to special light boxes can reduce symptoms in some people. Consider using higher wattage light bulbs.
- Increase your exposure to outdoor light. Spend time outdoors. Open the blinds. Rearrange your living space so you spend more time near a window.
- Exercise, eat a nutrient-dense diet, and remain awake during as many daylight hours as possible.
- If possible, take a vacation to a warmer, sunnier climate.

# Seeking Help

If you find your feelings of sadness are overwhelming, are persisting and interfering with your daily life and relationships, or if you are considering self-harm or suicide, seek additional help from a mental health professional.

Mental health professionals are trained to help you understand what might be beneath your depression so you can create a plan that will help you feel better. They provide unbiased emotional support and teach you healthy coping mechanisms so you feel empowered to handle your complex emotions.

Treatment plans vary according to your unique needs and experiences, but something you will likely do is create a Patient Safety Plan like the one on the following page. Even if you aren't seeing a professional, it's a good idea to create your own safety plan you can turn to in moments you feel hopeless or alone.



## Safety Plan

Step 1: Warning signs (thoughts, images, mood, situations, behavior) that a crisis may be developing:

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_

Step 2: Internal coping strategies - Things I can do to take my mind off my problems without contacting another person (relaxation technique, physical activity):

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_

Step 3: People and social settings that provide distraction:

- 1. Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Place \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Place \_\_\_\_\_

Step 4: People who I can ask for help:

- 1. Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Step 5: Professional or agencies I can contact during a crisis:

- 1. Clinician Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
Clinician Emergency Contact # \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Clinician Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
Clinician Emergency Contact # \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Local Urgent Care Services \_\_\_\_\_  
Urgent Care Services Address \_\_\_\_\_  
Urgent Care Services Phone \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. Suicide Prevention Lifeline Phone: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Step 6: Making the environment safe:

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_

## How to Support a Loved One Living with Depression

It's difficult to watch someone you love deal with depression, particularly if you are unfamiliar with the disorder. You might feel helpless and unsure of how to support that person through a challenging period.

If your loved one has not yet sought treatment from a mental health professional, you should encourage he, she, or them to do so. You might even offer to schedule and attend the appointment, prepare a list of questions for the doctor, or do anything else that might make the process easier. Just knowing you are there to help might be enough to get your loved one to take that difficult first step.

If your loved one is in treatment, you can still be of help. Often what people living with depression need most is someone to simply be there, listen, and validate what they are going through. It can be difficult to do this because you worry you might say the wrong thing and make matters worse.



## So What Can I Say?

To help you navigate these difficult conversations, we've compiled a list of statements someone who is feeling down might be grateful to hear.

- "I care."
- "I'm here for you."
- "What can I do to help?"
- "Have you reached out to a professional? Can I help you do that?"
- "Do you want to talk about it or would you prefer I just be here with you?"
- "Your life makes a difference to me."
- "I understand." (If you really do understand. If you don't, try, "I've never been through anything like that. That sounds \_\_\_\_\_.")
- "It's ok to feel this way."
- "You are strong."
- "There is hope."

No matter how compassionate you are, your loved one might still lash out at you. Each person is an individual with complex emotions, and depression can cause people to be angry and upset. When people are hurting, they might direct their bad feelings at those closest to them. If this happens to you, try not to take it personally. Remain calm and continue doing what you can to support your loved one.

# Suicide Warning Signs

It's important to understand the risk of suicide is high in those suffering with depression. No matter what you say or do to help your loved one, he, she, or they may still experience thoughts of self-harm or suicide. Be sure to be on the lookout for the warning signs so you know when to seek emergency help.

## Talk

People considering suicide might talk about:

- killing themselves
- feeling hopeless
- having no reason to live
- being a burden to others
- feeling trapped
- experiencing unbearable pain

## Mood

People considering suicide often display one or more of the following moods:

- depression
- anxiety
- loss of interest
- irritability
- humiliation/shame
- agitation/anger
- relief/sudden improvement

## Behavior

Behaviors that may signal risk, especially if related to a painful event, loss, or change, include:

- increased use of alcohol or drugs
- looking for a way to end their lives, such as searching online for methods
- withdrawing from activities
- isolating from family and friends
- sleeping too much or too little
- visiting or calling people to say goodbye
- giving away prized possessions
- aggression
- fatigue



At the end of this book, you'll find a list of resources we've compiled to help you and your loved one navigate this difficult experience. Remember, supporting someone living with depression is not easy, and, while it's important to learn all you can about the disorder so you can be of help, it's equally as important to take care of yourself. Do this by implementing your own self-care routine and asking for support from friends and family. Difficult as it may be, it's also important to remain patient and know that depression is treatable, but it can take time before symptoms improve.



## Moving Forward

My hope is that, having read this book, you now have a better understanding of what depression is, its causes and risk factors, the different ways it might manifest, and what you can do to prevent and manage it.

I encourage you to incorporate the tools I've included in this book into your daily life so when you encounter loss, change, rejection, or anything else that might trigger depression, you will be best able to cope in healthy ways.

I also hope this book will help you differentiate between normal sadness and depression so you'll know when it's time to reach out to others and seek additional treatment and will have the courage to do so.

It is never easy living with depression, but there is help and there is hope. You are brave for being here. Thank you for making space for me to be here with you.

Diane Lasher-Penti, LMFT  
Youth Services Director



*Remember, there is always hope.*

# Resources

## Hotlines:

Infoline and Suicide Hotline: 211 <http://www.preventsuicidect.org/>

Emergency: 911

Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services: 1-888-999-5545

Domestic Violence Crisis Services: 1-888-774-2900

## Community Agencies:

Institute of Living, Hartford, CT: 860-545-7200 [instituteofliving.org](http://instituteofliving.org)

Institute of Living, Anxiety Disorders Center: 860-545-7685 [instituteofliving.org](http://instituteofliving.org)

Community Health Resources: 1-877-844-3571 [chrhealth.org](http://chrhealth.org)

Stafford Family Services: 860-684-4239 [staffordct.org](http://staffordct.org)

Ellington Youth Services: 860-870-3130 [youth.ellington-ct.gov](http://youth.ellington-ct.gov)

Child and Adolescents Behavioral Health Services, ECHN: 860-647-6827 [echn.org](http://echn.org)

The Village for Families and Children, Hartford, CT: 860-236-4511 [thevillage.org](http://thevillage.org)

New England Center for CBT, Glastonbury, CT: 860-430-5515 [necbt.com](http://necbt.com)

Community Child Guidance Clinic, Manchester, CT: 860-643-2101 [ccgcinc.org](http://ccgcinc.org)

Mary's Place A Center for Grieving Children, Windsor, CT: 860-688-9621 [marysplacect.org](http://marysplacect.org)

Anxiety Treatment Center, Farmington, CT: 860-269-7813 [ctanxiety.com](http://ctanxiety.com)

The Bridge Family Center, Rockville, CT: 860-870-2543 [bridgefamilycenter.org](http://bridgefamilycenter.org)

West Meadow Counseling Center, Ellington, CT: 860-454-0520 [westmeadowcounseling.com](http://westmeadowcounseling.com)

# Acknowledgements

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention ([afsp.org](http://afsp.org))

Beyond the Blues, Lisa M. Schab, LCSW

Break Free From Depression, Boston Children's Hospital

Mayo Clinic ([mayoclinic.org](http://mayoclinic.org))

Harvard Health Publishing ([health.harvard.edu](http://health.harvard.edu))

Psychology Today

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