Learn the Signs

ONE-PAGE QUICK REFERENCE • Noticing changes early and responding with care

WATCH FOR CHANGES

- Mood: persistent sadness, anxiety, irritability, hopelessness or unusual emotional numbness.
- Interest: stopping activities or relationships that used to matter; seeming unable to enjoy anything.
- Function: difficulty with work, basic tasks, decisions, concentration, or personal care.
- Body: marked shifts in sleep, appetite, energy, or unexplained aches.
- Connection: isolation, avoiding calls, declining invitations, or feeling like a burden.

THREE FIRST STEPS

- Notice patterns and changes from the person's usual behavior; avoid assuming one sign proves depression.
- Ask privately: “I have noticed you seem different lately. How have things been for you?”
- Listen, offer practical help, and encourage professional evaluation if symptoms persist or affect daily life.

URGENT RED FLAGS

- Statements about wanting to die, feeling trapped, or being a burden; suicide plans, giving away belongings, or saying goodbye demand prompt action.
- If danger is immediate, call 911. Otherwise call or text 988 for U.S. crisis support; you can call about someone else.

Important: General educational information only; not diagnosis, treatment, or individualized safety planning. U.S. crisis support: call or text 988. For immediate danger or medical emergencies, call 911.

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WHY RECOGNITION MATTERS

Depression can develop gradually and may appear as exhaustion, withdrawal, irritability, or physical complaints rather than openly expressed sadness. A person may mask their difficulties, especially when they fear judgment.

Look for a meaningful shift lasting days or weeks and for effects on functioning. Depression is a medical condition, not evidence of a defective character or lack of effort.

COMMON SYMPTOMS IN CONTEXT

Anhedonia is reduced interest or pleasure. Someone may stop enjoying music, cooking, friendships, faith gatherings or hobbies even when they wish they could participate.

Sleep and appetite may rise or fall. Concentration can become difficult; simple decisions may feel overwhelming. Physical pain and fatigue may be prominent.

Life stressors such as divorce, bereavement, financial loss or unemployment can raise distress. They are not proof of depression and do not explain every case.

HOW TO APPROACH SOMEONE

Choose a calm, private moment; describe observable changes without labels or accusations. Ask open-ended questions, allow silence, and reflect back what you hear.

Try: “Would it help if I sat with you, helped you find a clinician, or went with you to an appointment?”

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WHAT NOT TO ASSUME

A smile or good day does not rule out depression; withdrawal does not necessarily mean rejection of loved ones. Substance use, medical illness, medication effects and other conditions can also change behavior.

Avoid saying “just think positively,” “others have it worse,” or “you have nothing to be sad about.” Even well-meant arguments can leave someone feeling more isolated.

WHEN TO INVOLVE PROFESSIONALS

Encourage a primary-care or mental-health appointment when changes continue, worsen, or limit daily life. A clinician can assess depression, other mental health conditions and potential medical causes.

For suicidal warning signs, ask directly whether they are considering suicide, listen without judgment, connect them to 988 or urgent clinical care, and seek emergency help for imminent danger.

A SMALL FOLLOW-UP PLAN

Agree on one concrete next step: a call tomorrow, an appointment, grocery help, transportation, or a check-in with another trusted person.

Keep reaching out without demanding a particular response. Reliable support often requires repeated, low-pressure contact.

RELIABLE SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression

https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/warning-signs-of-suicide

https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/5-action-steps-to-help-someone-having-thoughts-of-suicide

https://www.samhsa.gov/find-support/helping-someone/how-to-talk-to-someone-about-help

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