

# **THE STRONG RAM PROGRAM**

## **Being Supportive to a Companion with Depression**

A Companion can be a brother's strongest ally in the battle against depression. It's normal for someone to feel sad after a death or when he's sick, going through a breakup, struggling at work or school, or having money problems. But for some, the sadness doesn't go away or keeps coming back. If the feeling lasts more than a few weeks or makes it hard to carry on with daily life, it may be depression.

Depression is one of the most common mental health problems, but it often goes unnoticed and untreated among African American men. We're expected to be strong in a crisis, hide our sensitivities, and keep personal problems within the family. Some people think it's weak for a man to admit to sadness or despair.

That kind of scorn can convince a Companion to suffer in silence while the depression worsens. His life may start falling apart, and he may turn to drug abuse as a way to cope, or he may find other dangers that threaten liberty or even life. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among African Americans 15 to 24 years old, and it's the sixteenth leading cause of death for all African Americans.

But a friend's support and understanding tells a Companion he's not alone and can encourage him to seek help for his depression.

### **SIGNS OF DEPRESSION**

Depression symptoms can be different for each person. Someone with depression may feel sad, anxious, empty, hopeless, guilty, worthless, helpless, tired, irritable, or restless. He may have other symptoms, too:

- (A) Aches, pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems.
- (A) Loss of interest in activities he used to enjoy, including sex.
- (A) Problems concentrating, remembering information, or making decisions.
- (A) Problems falling or staying asleep or sleeping too much.
- (A) Eating too much or not wanting to eat at all.
- (A) Thinking about or attempting suicide.

While both men and women can suffer from depression, their signs can be very different. Men may be more likely than women to be exhausted and irritable, avoid the things they used to enjoy, lose sleep, and use alcohol or drugs to cope. They also may become frustrated, discouraged, reckless, angry, or abusive. Some bury themselves in their work to avoid talking about their depression with family or friends.

### **WHAT TO SAY**

Here are some examples of what to say to help your friend open up. Being there, showing that you understand and want to help, can really make a difference.

- (A) I've been worried about you. How are you—really?



- (A) I've noticed some changes in you lately and wanted to check in with you.
- (A) It sounds like you're having a tough time. It must be really hard to try to hold everything together when you're feeling this bad.
- (A) When did you start feeling like this? Did something happen that started it?
- (A) How can I help you to find help? Feeling depressed isn't a sign of weakness. It takes courage to speak up.
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If you're uncomfortable talking about feelings, it's tempting to avoid or cut short the conversation, but your respect and support are needed here more than ever. Just listening can mean a lot.

## WHAT NOT TO SAY

Remember that depression is a real illness. Don't minimize or joke about your friend's distress. He may already think he should be able to just "cheer up" or "snap out of it" and feel embarrassed because he can't.

Here are some examples of what not to say to a depressed friend:

- (A) It's all in your head.
- (A) You're just having a bad day.
- (A) I'm sure it's nothing to worry about.
- (A) Man up; you can deal with this on your own.
- (A) Why are you talking about this stuff?
- (A) You don't want people to think you're crazy.
- (A) Counseling is for sissies.
- (A) What will your family say?

## HOW CAN YOU GIVE SUPPORT?

Don't think you have to come up with answers to fix all of your friend's troubles. Depression is a health problem, and he may need to talk to a **counselor or doctor**, which you can help him find. Offer to go with him if it will help. If he doesn't want to see a mental health professional, suggest a general checkup with a family doctor, who can rule out any other illnesses and refer your friend to **mental health services** if the diagnosis is depression.

There are other ways to help, too:

- (A) Keep in touch—meet up, phone, or text to see how he's doing. It will remind him he's not going through it alone and that you care.





Talk about other everyday things, as well as his mental health.



Invite him to join you for simple activities like watching TV, shooting hoops, eating a meal, or going for a walk. If he refuses, keep trying, but don't push.



Help with everyday tasks that can be difficult to manage in times of depression—errands, meals, cleaning, paying bills on time, and showing up to doctor's appointments.



Never ignore comments about suicide, self-harm, or harming others.

## HEALTHY HABITS OF EMOTIONAL WELLBEING



# CONTINUE TO BE RAM STRONG!

Mental Health America. (n.d.). African American communities and mental health. Retrieved from <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/african-american-mental-health>

Suicide Prevention Resource Center. (n.d.). Suicide among racial/ethnic populations in the U.S. Retrieved from <http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/Blacks%20Sheet%20August%202013%20Final.pdf>

National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD), <http://www.nimhd.nih.gov>

Giveanhour, changedirection.org: [www.giveanhour.org/emotional-wellbeing-resources](http://www.giveanhour.org/emotional-wellbeing-resources)

