The Unseen Impact of Treatment-Resistant Depression (TRD)

IN THE UNITED STATES

compass



Executive Summary

Depressive disorders are often described in terms of symptoms, diagnoses and treatments. But for many patients, the actual lived experience can be more difficult to convey to the people in their lives. This may be especially challenging for those who have tried multiple treatments that haven't worked for them.

Treatment-resistant depression (TRD) is generally defined as depression that has not sufficiently improved after trying at least two antidepressant treatments of adequate dose and duration. This definition tells only part of the story. Beyond the symptoms and treatment history are individuals navigating repeated treatment attempts while trying to maintain their careers, relationships, responsibilities and sense of self. Alongside them are their loved ones – caregivers, partners, children and friends who often carry their own, largely unseen, burden of TRD. TRD can be measured not only in the persistence of depressive symptoms, but in the missed milestones, relationships strained and the growing distance between the life someone is living and the life they imagined for themselves.

To better understand these experiences, Compass Pathways, in partnership with the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, surveyed 261 people living with TRD and 73 caregivers in the United States.[1] The findings offer a closer look at the realities of living with a condition that can profoundly affect a person's daily life, revealing not only the burden of recurrent and prolonged depressive episodes, but also what people are still hoping to reclaim.

If you or someone you know is struggling with their mental health or experiencing emotional distress, support is available. Visit the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline or call or text 988 to connect with a trained crisis counselor. The service is free, confidential and available 24/7 in the United States.

About the survey

This report is based on an online survey conducted by Outcomes Insights, an independent market research agency, on behalf of Compass Pathways. The primary objective of the survey was to generate a comprehensive understanding of the experiences, attitudes and perceptions of adults living with TRD and their caregivers. The survey was conducted in the U.S. among 261 adult patients (18 years or older) with treatment-resistant depression (TRD) and 73 caregivers from September 16 to October 5, 2026. DBSA reviewed the survey results in advance of publication and received compensation for their collaboration.

Patients were defined as adults 18 years or older diagnosed by a healthcare provider with depression or major depressive disorder whose most recent episode of depression was treated with at least two different antidepressants for at least four weeks each without significant symptom improvement. Caregivers were defined as someone actively involved in emotional monitoring, daily functioning and guiding treatment decisions for a loved one who met the patient criteria. All survey data were self-reported by participating patients and caregivers, including information regarding diagnosis, treatment history and lived experiences.

Profile of Patients (n=261 patients)

Gender

72% Female

28% Male

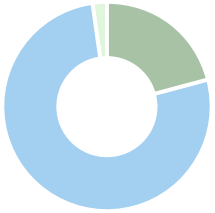
Median Age

42 years

Veteran

7% Yes 93% No

LGBTQ+ Community

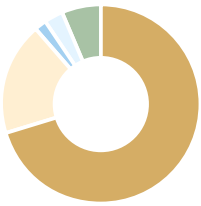


21% Yes

77% No

2% Prefer not to answer

Race/Ethnicity



69% White

18% Black

2% Asian

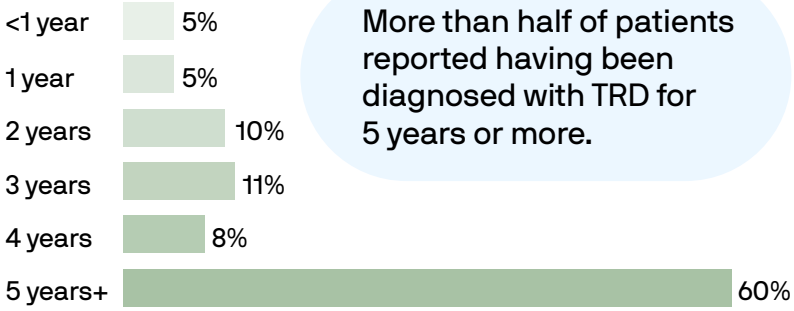
3% Multiracial

6% All others

Hispanic/Latino/Spanish

14% Yes 85% No

Time with TRD



More than half of patients reported having been diagnosed with TRD for 5 years or more.

Profile of Caregivers (n=73 caregivers)

Gender

51% Female

49% Male

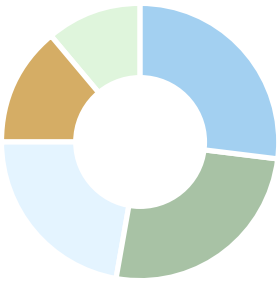
Median Age

42 years

Median Age of Patient

38 years

Relationship to Patient



27% Sibling

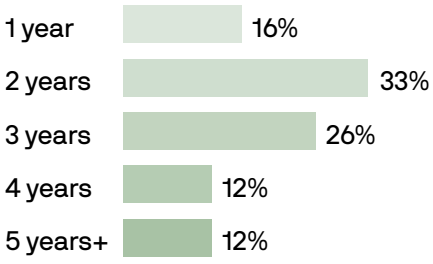
26% Spouse

22% Family member

14% Friend

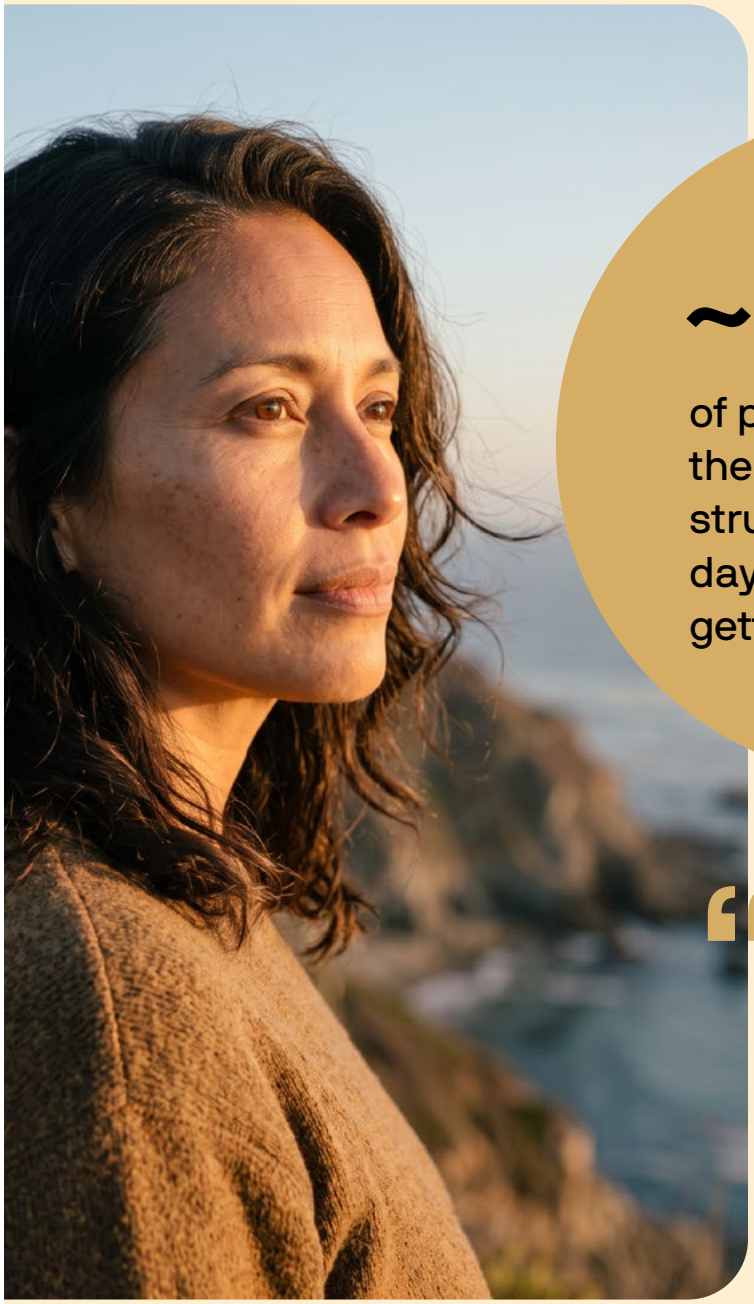
11% Child

Time with TRD



PATIENTS

The Lived Experience



~95%

of patients describe themselves as either struggling, surviving day-to-day or barely getting by

> [I've lost] time. Happiness. Moments I will probably never get to relive. Life is so short and I want to live, but I cannot."
>
> – PATIENT WITH TRD

Surviving, Not Living

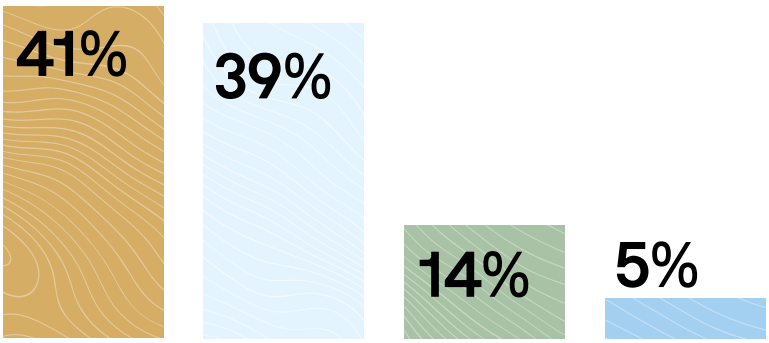
There is a difference between getting through the day and feeling present in it.

For people living with TRD, that distinction can become increasingly difficult to ignore. Activities that once brought pleasure, relationships that once offered connection and routines that once felt effortless may begin to feel distant or inaccessible. Even when individuals are able to meet the demands of daily life, doing so may come at a disproportionately high cost of energy expenditure.

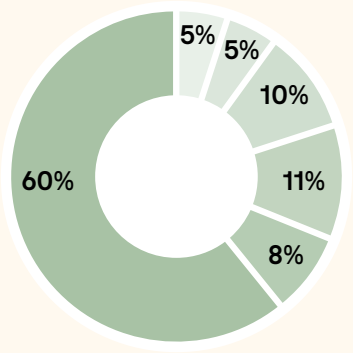
Survey findings demonstrate the extent to which TRD can shape the everyday experience of those living with it. **95%** of surveyed patients described themselves as either struggling, surviving day-to-day or barely getting by and the majority felt their lives had been put on hold.

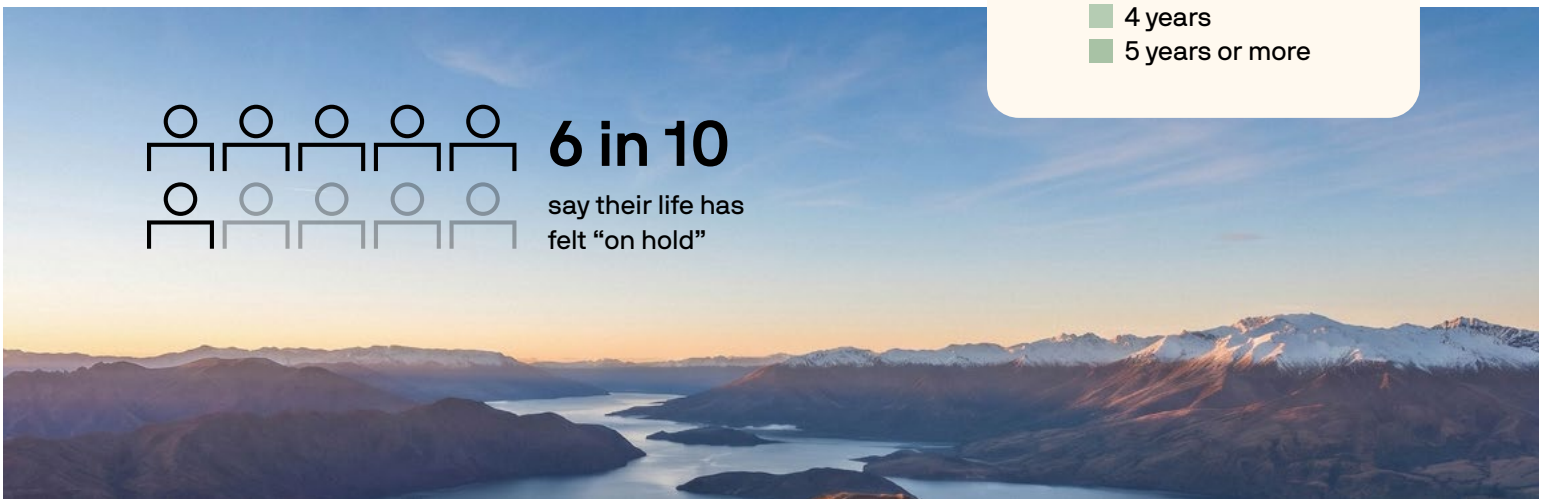
These experiences point to a reality that may be overlooked when treatment progress is assessed primarily through symptom improvement: people living with TRD are not simply seeking to feel less depressed. They want to participate more fully in their own lives.

Descriptors of life today with TRD



Reported time living with TRD





Invisible, Misunderstood & Alone

Depression does not always have a visible face. And for people living with TRD, the gap between what others see and what they experience can be especially isolating.

Friends, colleagues and even loved ones may struggle to understand why symptoms persist despite treatment. Well-intentioned encouragement to try harder, think positively or simply give treatment more time can overlook the complexity of a condition that has not improved despite multiple treatment attempts.

89% of respondents have felt judged or misunderstood because their depression hasn't improved, and 71% believe others think they should be able to overcome their depression.

Respondents say TRD has negatively impacted:

69% relationships with friends

50% marriage/partnership

49% dating life

48% relationship with parents

35% relationship with children

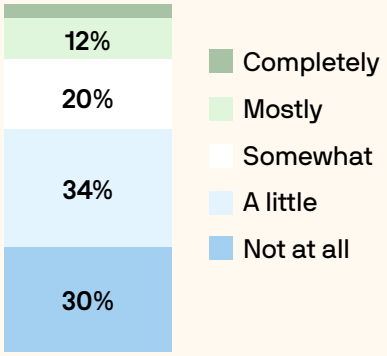
These experiences underscore the importance of recognizing TRD as more than an extended period of sadness or a failure of individual effort. Research increasingly points to complex biological processes, including alterations in brain networks involved in mood, cognition and emotional processing, that may contribute to the persistence of depressive symptoms.[2-6]

Greater understanding of TRD has the potential to change how people living with the condition are seen, supported and heard.

62%
say TRD feels like an "invisible disease"

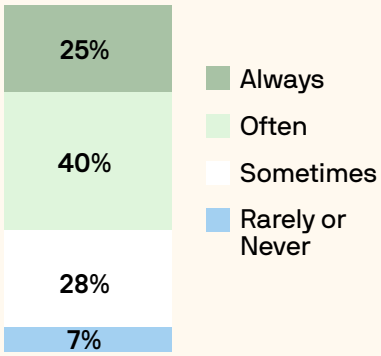
Understanding the TRD experience

Very few patients (16%) feel people mostly or completely understand the experience of living with TRD.



The burden of TRD

65% of patients always or often worry that their TRD is a burden on their loved ones.

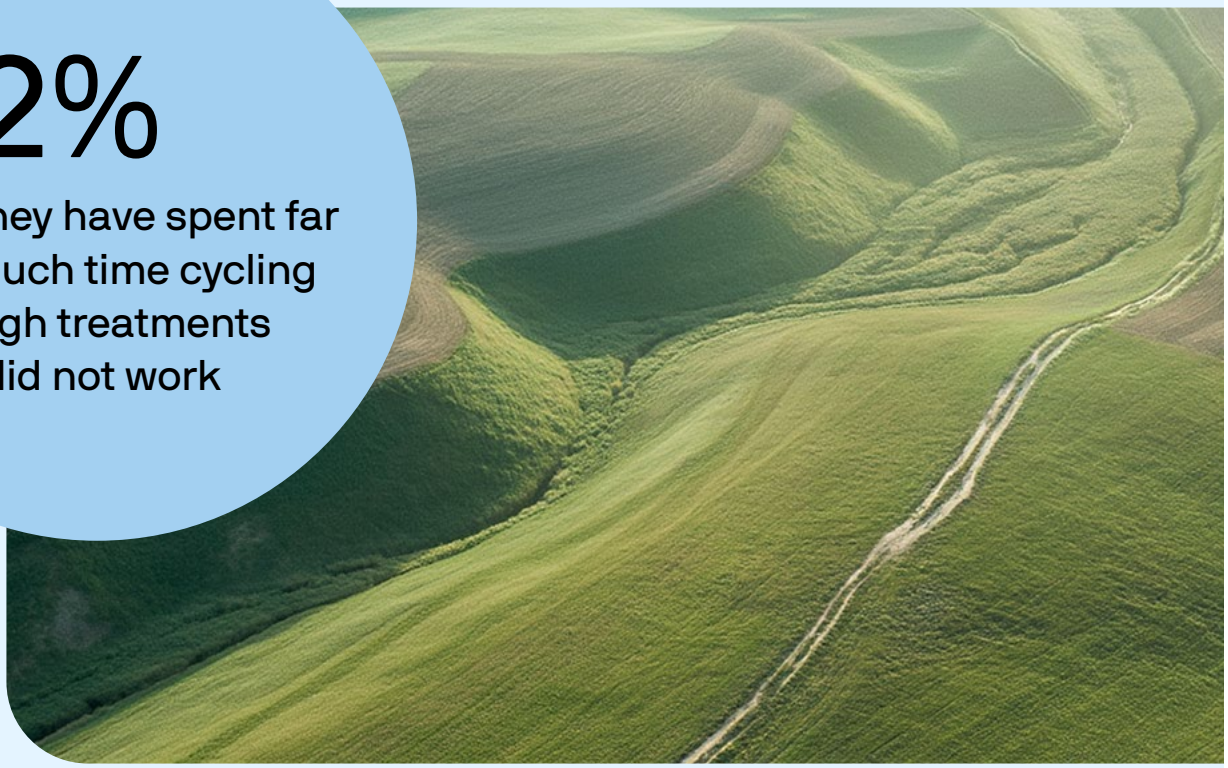


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Navigating Treatment

62%

say they have spent far too much time cycling through treatments that did not work



> “I’ve lost my conviction and the reason to even continue. Why exist in a world where you can’t be yourself and where no one cares about your wellbeing or existence.”
>
> – PATIENT WITH TRD

Cycling Through Unsuccessful Treatments

The search for relief is often a defining part of TRD itself.

Beginning a new treatment may bring renewed expectations, followed by weeks or months of waiting to see whether meaningful improvement will occur. When it does not, the process begins again: another conversation, another treatment decision, another period of uncertainty.

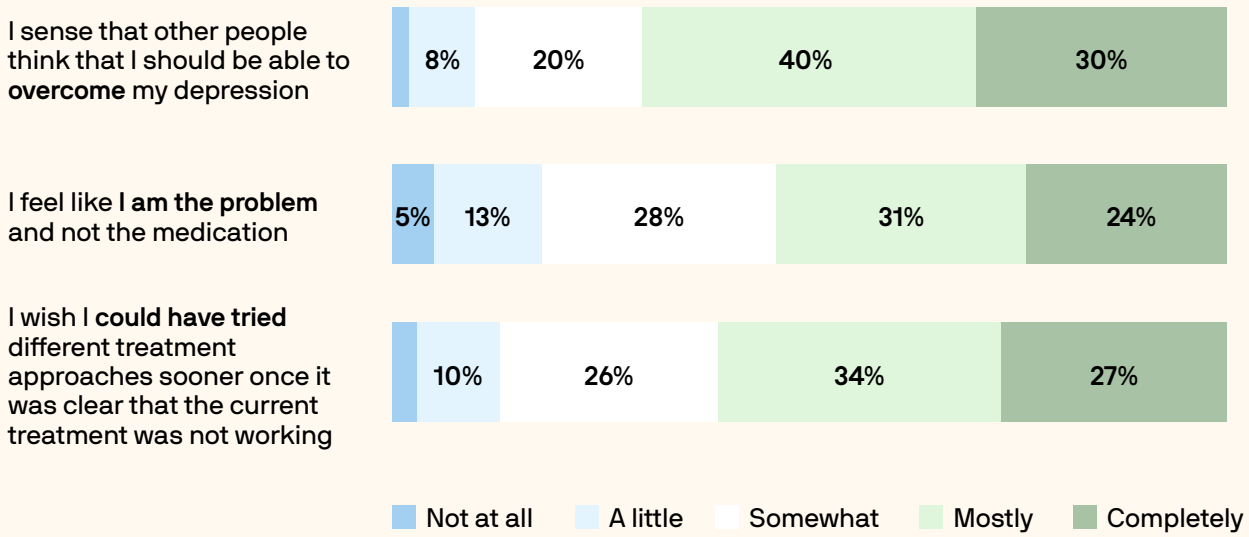
Most patients (almost **75%**) feel that they have tried all available treatment options and are emotionally exhausted from trying treatments that have not worked.

Additionally, **62%** said they had spent far too much time cycling through treatments that did not work.

Each unsuccessful treatment can represent another period in which depressive symptoms persist, while personal goals, relationships and everyday responsibilities remain affected. They feel the societal expectation that they should be able to overcome their depression on their own (**70%**) and often feel that they – not their treatment – are to blame (**55%**).

For people who have already spent years searching for relief, the question may no longer be simply whether another treatment will work, but whether they will ever feel better.

Patient perspectives on life with TRD:



When Hope Begins to Fade

The emotional toll of unsuccessful treatments can accumulate alongside the burden of depression itself. What may begin as optimism about a new treatment can gradually give way to frustration, exhaustion and uncertainty about whether recovery is possible.

In the survey, **nearly 75%** of respondents reported feeling emotionally exhausted from trying antidepressant treatments that had not worked.

< 1 in 5
say they often feel hopeful about their future

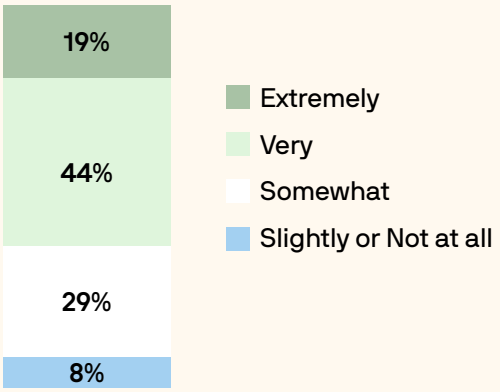
57%
feel they have lost part of their identity

69%
feel disconnected from who they really are

These findings highlight an important dimension of TRD: the experience of treatment resistance and prolonged depressive episodes may shape not only how individuals feel in the present, but how they imagine their future.

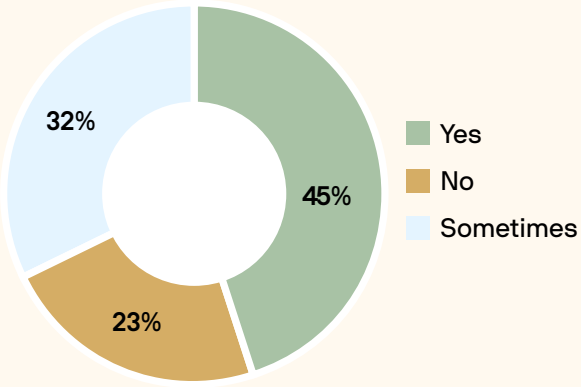
After repeated disappointments, the possibility of feeling better can begin to seem increasingly out of reach. And when that happens, the effects of TRD may influence expectations and the motivation to keep searching for relief.

Frustration with experience with depression treatments:



2/3 of patients are frustrated by their experience with depression treatments

Feelings of wanting to stop treatment altogether:



77% at least sometimes felt like wanting to stop treatment altogether

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Life Doesn’t Wait



Over half

say TRD has robbed them of years of their life

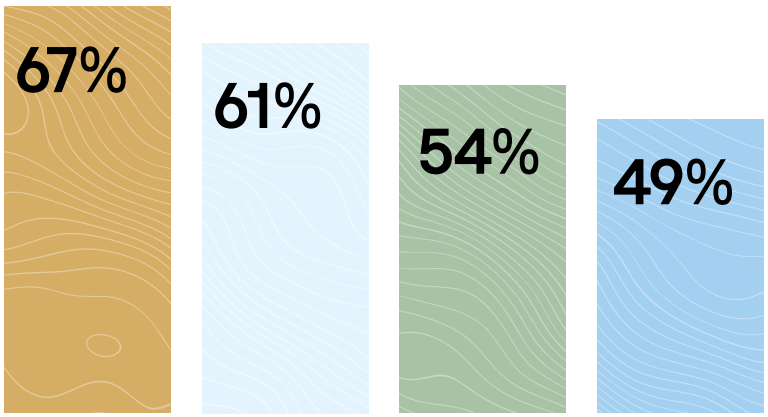
> “I lost my career; I am on permanent disability because of it. I’ve missed out on years of my children’s lives. My marriage is an everyday struggle. I don’t have friends. I’ve lost everything.”
>
> – PATIENT WITH TRD

Time That Can't be Reclaimed

As a person's depressive symptoms go on, so does the world around them. Careers advance. Families grow. Friendships evolve. Opportunities come and go. Participating in these moments during an active episode may be difficult or entirely out of reach.

Survey findings reveal how TRD can affect employment and career progression, finances, relationships and daily function. Among surveyed patients, **over half** say TRD has robbed them of years of their life.

Events those surveyed missed because of TRD:



Impact of TRD on their careers:

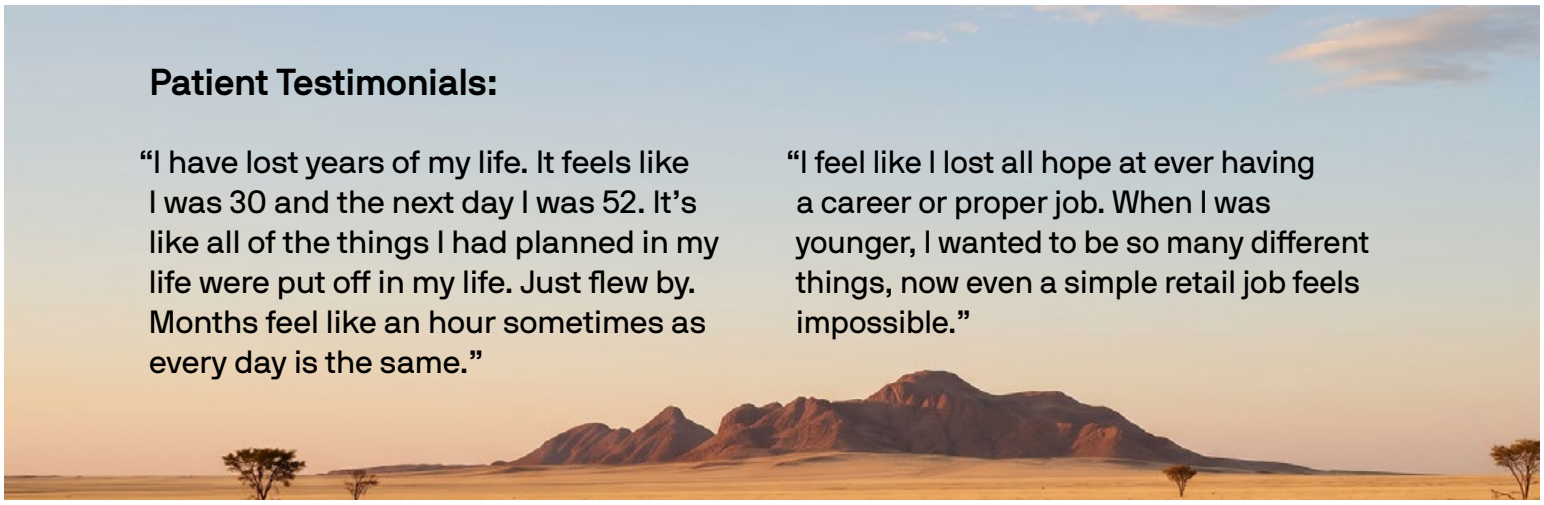
52%
have reduced their work hours

1 in 3
have lost a job

40%
have taken an extended leave of absence

These are not simply disruptions to daily routines. Over time, they may change the course of a person's life, influencing decisions about work, relationships, independence and the future.

The burden of TRD cannot be fully understood without considering what happens outside the clinical setting. It is reflected in the experiences people miss, the choices they feel unable to make and the parts of their lives that remain on hold.



Patient Testimonials:

"I have lost years of my life. It feels like I was 30 and the next day I was 52. It's like all of the things I had planned in my life were put off in my life. Just flew by. Months feel like an hour sometimes as every day is the same."

"I feel like I lost all hope at ever having a career or proper job. When I was younger, I wanted to be so many different things, now even a simple retail job feels impossible."

CAREGIVERS

The Ripple Effect on Loved Ones



> At this point I would say I have lost my career momentum, my financial security and my hope for the future. My wife is surviving but not living which is really hard to watch."

– CAREGIVER OF PATIENT WITH TRD

~70%

of caregivers say TRD affects the whole family's social, physical and/or mental health

Behind the Support

TRD does not exist in isolation. Its effects can extend into households, relationships and families, affecting the lives of those who care for someone experiencing persistent depression.

For caregivers supporting a loved one with TRD, it can be challenging to balance practical daily tasks and caregiving responsibilities while also maintaining their own emotional wellness. While they may become advocates, sources of reassurance or coordinators of care for their loved ones, they also may be primarily responsible for keeping daily life moving alongside managing their own uncertainty about what the future holds.

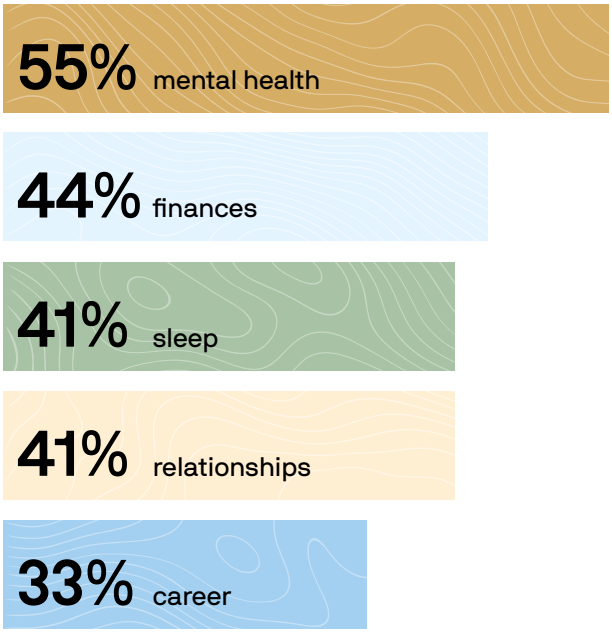
Among caregivers surveyed:

51%
have reduced the number of hours they work

~1 in 2
wish they had an emotional support system of their own

41%
say their own lives are shaped by their loved ones TRD

TRD has mostly or completely taken a toll on caregivers:

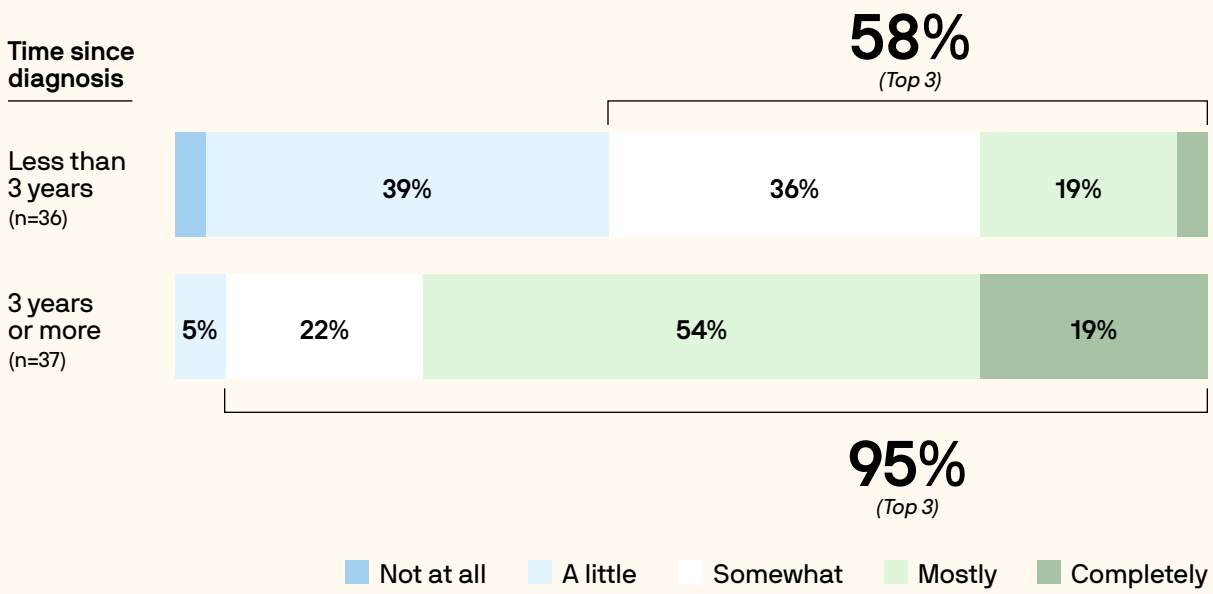


There is also the less visible experience of watching someone they love struggle despite repeated efforts to find relief. Caregivers may share in the disappointment of unsuccessful treatments while feeling limited in their ability to change the circumstances. **Over half** of surveyed caregivers said they feel emotionally exhausted by repeated treatment attempts that have not worked for their loved one.

Nearly 70% say TRD affects the whole family's social, physical and/or mental health. They lose shared routines, plans and a sense of normalcy. They mourn the loss of the person their loved one used to be.

Emotional exhaustion builds over time

'I am emotionally exhausted as a caregiver'



What has TRD taken from your family?

"The man I married. He used to plan our weekends, tell dumb jokes and dance around the kitchen while he cooked. Now most days he is quiet and just stares at the TV. I miss that person a lot and I cannot remember the last time I heard him really laugh. "

"Sleep. I know that sounds simple, but I have not had a full night's sleep in over two years. I am either staying up worrying about her or waking up to check on her."

"The sister I grew up with. She used to be the first person to whom I would call with good or bad news, and now our conversations feel cautious...That version of our relationship is gone."

"As a parent I had dreams for them to travel, to get an education and to make connections. So, it is really heartbreaking to see those dreams fade."

These findings illustrate why the burden of TRD must be considered beyond clinical symptoms. The effects of persistent depression can be felt across entire support systems, making the experiences and needs of caregivers an essential part of the conversation.

PATIENTS

Looking Ahead

Reclaiming What TRD Has Put Out of Reach

For people living with TRD, the idea of recovery may be about far more than a reduction in depressive symptoms. After years spent navigating persistent symptoms and unsuccessful treatments, even ordinary experiences can be particularly significant.



Beyond clinical measures, there are deeply personal aspirations: the desire to feel like oneself again, to reconnect with and participate in relationships and communities and to make plans without depression defining what is possible.

For anyone experiencing emotional distress or in need of immediate support, the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline offers free, confidential support 24/7. Call or text 988 or visit 988lifeline.org.

Conclusion

For people impacted by TRD – both patients and caregivers alike – repeated unsuccessful treatments can mean prolonged periods of uncertainty, emotional exhaustion and extended disruption to everyday life.

The experiences shared through this report also illuminate what remains important to those affected by TRD: connection, independence, purpose and the possibility of a future that is not defined by their mental health condition.

Understanding the full burden of TRD is an essential part of recognizing the unmet needs of this community. And listening to the people living with those needs is where meaningful progress must begin.

1. Compass Pathways. Survey of Patients and Caregivers Living with Treatment-Resistant Depression. Data on file. 2026. **2.** Kilic B, et al. Nat Commun. 2026;17:5662. **3.** Lynch CJ, et al. Nature. 2024;633(8030):624-633 **4.** McIntyre RS, et al. World Psychiatry. 2023;22(3):394-412. **5.** Rush AJ, et al. Am J Psychiatry. 2006;163(11):1905-1917. **6.** Pappa S, et al. BJPsych Open. 2024;10(1):e32.

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DBSA Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

Find Community.
Find Wellness.
Find Hope.™

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