

Dealing with Depression

SELF-HELP AND COPING TIPS

Depression drains your energy, hope, and drive, making it difficult to do what you need to feel better. But while overcoming depression isn't quick or easy, it's far from impossible. You can't beat it through sheer willpower, but you do have some control—even if your depression is severe and stubbornly persistent. The key is to start small and build from there. Feeling better takes time, but you can get there if you make positive choices for yourself each day.

The road to depression recovery

Recovering from depression requires action. But taking action when you're depressed is hard. In fact, just thinking about the things you should do to feel better, like going for a walk or spending time with friends, can be exhausting.

It's the Catch-22 of depression recovery. The things that help the most are the things that are most difficult to do. But there's a difference between difficult and impossible.

Start small and stay focused

The key to depression recovery is to start with a few small goals and slowly build from there. Draw upon whatever resources you have. You may not have much energy, but you probably have enough to take a short walk around the block or pick up the phone to call a loved one.

Take things one day at a time and reward yourself for each accomplishment. The steps may seem small, but they'll quickly add up. And for all the energy you put in to your depression recovery, you'll get back much more in return.

Depression self-help tip 1: Cultivate supportive relationships

Getting the support you need plays a big role in lifting the fog of depression and keeping it away. On your own, it can be difficult to maintain perspective and sustain the effort required to beat depression. But the very nature of depression makes it difficult to reach out for help. However, isolation and loneliness make depression even worse, so maintaining your close relationships and social activities are important.

The thought of reaching out to even close family members and friends can seem overwhelming. You may feel ashamed, too exhausted to talk, or guilty for neglecting the relationship. Remind yourself that this is the depression talking. You loved ones care about you and want to help.

- **Turn to trusted friends and family members.** Share what you're going through with the people you love and trust. Ask for the help and support you need. You may have retreated from your most treasured relationships, but they can get you through this tough time.
- **Try to keep up with social activities even if you don't feel like it.** When you're depressed, it feels more comfortable to retreat into your shell. But being around other people will make you feel less depressed.
- **Join a support group for depression.** Being with others who are dealing with depression can go a long way in reducing your sense of isolation. You can also encourage each other, give and receive advice on how to cope, and share your experiences.

10 tips for reaching out and building relationships

- Talk to one person about your feelings.
- Help someone else by volunteering.
- Have lunch or coffee with a friend.
- Ask a loved one to check in with you regularly.
- Accompany someone to the movies, a concert, or a small get-together.
- Call or email an old friend.
- Go for a walk with a workout buddy.
- Schedule a weekly dinner date.
- Meet new people by taking a class or joining a club.
- Confide in a counselor, therapist, or clergy member.

Depression self-help tip 2: Challenge negative thinking

Learn about hidden sources of depression

Depression puts a negative spin on everything, including the way you see yourself, the situations you encounter, and your expectations for the future.

But you can't break out of this pessimistic mind frame by "just thinking positive." Happy thoughts or wishful thinking won't cut it. Rather, the trick is to replace negative thoughts with more balanced thoughts.

Ways to challenge negative thinking:

- **Think outside yourself.** Ask yourself if you'd say what you're thinking about yourself to someone else. If not, stop being so hard on yourself. Think about less harsh statements that offer more realistic descriptions.
- **Allow yourself to be less than perfect.** Many depressed people are perfectionists, holding themselves to impossibly high standards and then beating themselves up when they fail to meet them. Battle this source of self-imposed stress by challenging your negative ways of thinking
- **Socialize with positive people.** Notice how people who always look on the bright side deal with challenges, even minor ones, like not being able to find a parking space. Then consider how you would react in the same situation. Even if you have to pretend, try to adopt their optimism and persistence in the face of difficulty.
- **Keep a "negative thought log."** Whenever you experience a negative thought, jot down the thought and what triggered it in a notebook. Review your log when you're in a good mood. Consider if the negativity was truly warranted. Ask yourself if there's another way to view the situation. For example, let's say your boyfriend was short with you and you automatically assumed that the relationship was in trouble. But maybe he's just having a bad day.

Types of negative thinking that add to depression

All-or-nothing thinking - Looking at things in black-or-white categories, with no middle ground ("If I fall short of perfection, I'm a total failure.")

Overgeneralization - Generalizing from a single negative experience, expecting it to hold true forever ("I can't do anything right.")

The mental filter - Ignoring positive events and focusing on the negative. Noticing the one thing that went wrong, rather than all the things that went right.

Diminishing the positive - Coming up with reasons why positive events don't count ("She said she had a good time on our date, but I think she was just being nice.")

Jumping to conclusions - Making negative interpretations without actual evidence. You act like a mind reader ("He must think I'm pathetic.") or a fortune teller ("I'll be stuck in this dead end job forever.")

Types of negative thinking that add to depression

Emotional reasoning - Believing that the way you feel reflects reality (“I feel like such a loser. I really am no good!”)

'Shoulds' and 'should-nots' - Holding yourself to a strict list of what you should and shouldn't do, and beating yourself up if you don't live up to your rules.

Labeling - Labeling yourself based on mistakes and perceived shortcomings (“I'm a failure; an idiot; a loser.”)

Depression self-help tip 3: Take care of yourself

In order to overcome depression, you have to take care of yourself. This includes following a healthy lifestyle, learning to manage stress, setting limits on what you're able to do, adopting healthy habits, and scheduling fun activities into your day.

- **Aim for 8 hours of sleep.** Depression typically involves sleep problems. Whether you're sleeping too little or too much, your mood suffers. Get on a better sleep schedule [by learning healthy sleep habits](#).
- **Expose yourself to a little sunlight every day.** Lack of sunlight can make depression worse. Make sure you're getting enough. Take a short walk outdoors, have your coffee outside, enjoy an *al fresco* meal, people-watch on a park bench, or sit out in the garden.
- **Keep stress in check.** Not only does stress prolong and worsen depression, but it can also trigger it. Figure out all the things in your life that are stressing you out. Examples include: work overload, unsupportive relationships, taking on too much, or health problems. Once you've identified your stressors, you can make a plan to avoid them or minimize their impact.
- **Practice relaxation techniques.** A daily relaxation practice can help relieve symptoms of depression, reduce stress, and boost feelings of joy and well-being. Try yoga, deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or meditation.
- **Care for a pet.** While nothing can replace the human connection, pets can bring joy and companionship into your life and help you feel less isolated. Caring for a pet can also get you outside of yourself and you a sense of being needed—both powerful antidotes to depression.

Do things you enjoy (or used to)

While you can't force yourself to have fun or experience pleasure, you can choose to do things that you used to enjoy. Pick up a former hobby or a sport you used to like. Express yourself creatively through music, art, or writing. Go out with friends. Take a day trip to a museum, the mountains, or the ballpark.

Push yourself to do things, even when you don't feel like it. You might be surprised at how much better you feel once you're out in the world. Even if your depression doesn't lift immediately, you'll gradually feel more upbeat and energetic as you make time for fun activities.

Develop a wellness toolbox

Come up with a list of things that you can do for a quick mood boost. Include any strategies, activities, or skills that have helped in the past. The more “tools” for coping with depression, the better. Try and implement a few of these ideas each day, even if you're feeling good.

- Spend some time in nature
- List what you like about yourself
- Take care of a few small tasks
- Play with a pet
- Write in your journal
- Listen to music

- Read a good book
- Watch a funny movie or TV show
- Take a long, hot bath
- Do something spontaneous

Depression self-help tip 4: Get regular exercise

When you're depressed, exercising may be the last thing you feel like doing. But [exercise is a powerful tool for dealing with depression](#). In fact, studies show that regular exercise can be as effective as antidepressant medication at increasing energy levels and decreasing feelings of fatigue.

Scientists haven't figured out exactly why exercise is such a potent antidepressant, but evidence suggests that physical activity triggers new cell growth in the brain, increases mood-enhancing neurotransmitters and endorphins, reduces stress, and relieves muscle tension—all things that can have a positive effect on depression.

To get the most benefit, aim for 30 minutes of exercise per day. But you can start small. Short 10-minute bursts of activity can have a positive effect on your mood. Here are a few easy ways to get moving:

- Take the stairs rather than the elevator
- Park your car in the farthest spot in the lot
- Take your dog for a walk
- Pair up with an exercise partner
- Walk while you're talking on the phone

As a next step, try incorporating walks or some other enjoyable, easy form of exercise into your daily routine. The key is to pick an activity you enjoy, so you're more likely to keep up with it.

Exercise as an Antidepressant

The following exercise tips offer a powerful prescription for boosting mood:

- **Exercise now...and again.** A 10-minute walk can improve your mood for two hours. The key to sustaining mood benefits is to exercise regularly.
- **Choose activities that are moderately intense.** Aerobic exercise undoubtedly has mental health benefits, but you don't need to sweat strenuously to see results.
- **Find exercises that are continuous and rhythmic (rather than intermittent).** Walking, swimming, dancing, stationary biking, and yoga are good choices.
- **Add a mind-body element.** Activities such as yoga and tai chi rest your mind and pump up your energy. You can also add a meditative element to walking or swimming by repeating a mantra (a word or phrase) as you move.
- **Start slowly, and don't overdo it.** More isn't better. Athletes who over train find their moods drop rather than lift.

Adapted from Johns Hopkins Health Alerts

Depression self-help tip 5: Eat a healthy, mood-boosting diet

What you eat has a direct impact on the way you feel. Aim for a balanced diet of protein, complex carbohydrates, fruits and vegetables.

- **Don't skip meals.** Going too long between meals can make you feel irritable and tired, so aim to eat something at least every 3-4 hours.
- **Minimize sugar and refined carbs.** You may crave sugary snacks, baked goods, or comfort foods such as pasta or french fries. But these “feel-good” foods quickly lead to a crash in mood and energy.
- **Focus on complex carbohydrates.** Foods such as baked potatoes, whole-wheat pasta, brown rice, oatmeal, whole grain breads, and bananas can boost serotonin levels without a crash.
- **Boost your B vitamins.** Deficiencies in B vitamins such as folic acid and B-12 can trigger depression. To get more, take a B-complex vitamin supplement or eat more citrus fruit, leafy greens, beans, chicken, and eggs.
- **Consider taking a chromium supplement.** Some depression studies show that chromium picolinate reduces carbohydrate cravings, eases mood swings, and boosts energy. Supplementing with chromium picolinate is especially effective for people who tend to overeat and oversleep when depressed.

Omega-3 fatty acids play an essential role in stabilizing mood.

- Foods rich in certain omega-3 fats called EPA and DHA can give your mood a big boost. The best sources are fatty fish such as salmon, herring, mackerel, anchovies, sardines, and some cold water fish oil supplements. Canned albacore tuna and lake trout can also be good sources, depending on how the fish were raised and processed.
- You may hear a lot about getting your omega-3's from foods rich in ALA fatty acids. Main sources are vegetable oils and nuts (especially walnuts), flax, soybeans, and tofu. Be aware that our bodies generally convert very little ALA into EPA and DHA, so you may not see as big of a benefit.
- Some people avoid seafood because they worry about mercury or other possible toxins. But most experts agree that the benefits of eating 2 servings a week of cold water fatty fish outweigh the risks.

Depression self-help tip 6: Know when to get additional help

If you find your depression getting worse and worse, [seek professional help](#). Needing additional help doesn't mean you're weak. Sometimes the negative thinking in depression can make you feel like you're a lost cause, but depression can be treated and you can feel better!

Don't forget about these self-help tips, though. Even if you're receiving professional help, these tips can be part of your treatment plan, speeding your recovery and preventing depression from returning.