

DEPRESSION

Coping with Depression

When you're depressed, you can't just will yourself to "snap out of it." But these coping strategies can help you deal with depression and put you on the road to recovery.

By [Melinda Smith, M.A.](#), [Lawrence Robinson](#) and [Jeanne Segal, Ph.D.](#)

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Why is dealing with depression so difficult?

Depression drains your energy, hope, and drive, making it difficult to take the steps that will help you to feel better. Sometimes, just thinking about the things you should do to feel better, like exercising or spending time with friends, can seem exhausting or impossible to put into action.

It's the Catch-22 of depression recovery: The things that help the most are the things that are the most difficult to do. There is a big difference, however, between something that's difficult and something that's impossible. While recovering from depression isn't quick or easy, you do have more control than you realize—even if your depression is severe and stubbornly persistent. The key is to start small and build from there. You may not have much energy, but by drawing on all your reserves, you should have enough to take a walk around the block or pick up the phone to call a loved one, for example.

Taking the first step is always the hardest. But going for a walk or getting up and dancing to your favorite music, for example, is something you can do right now. And it can substantially boost your mood and energy for several hours—long enough to put a second recovery step into action, such as preparing a mood-boosting meal or arranging to meet an old friend. By taking the following small but positive steps day by day, you'll soon lift the heavy fog of depression and find yourself feeling happier, healthier, and more hopeful again.

Coping with depression tip 1: Reach out and stay connected

Getting support plays an essential role in overcoming depression. On your own, it can be difficult to maintain a healthy perspective and sustain the effort required to beat depression. At the same time, the very nature of depression makes it difficult to reach out for help. When you're depressed, the tendency is to withdraw and isolate so that connecting to even close family members and friends can be tough.

[\[Read: Helping Someone with Depression\]](#)

You may feel too exhausted to talk, ashamed at your situation, or guilty for neglecting certain relationships. But this is just the depression talking. Staying connected to other people and taking part in social activities will make a world of difference in your mood and outlook. Reaching out is not a sign of weakness and it won't mean you're a burden to others. Your loved ones care about you and want to help. And if you don't feel that you have anyone to turn to, it's never too late to [build new friendships](#) and improve your support network.

How to reach out for depression support

Look for support from people who make you feel safe and cared for. The person you talk to doesn't have to be able to fix you; they just need to be a good listener—someone who'll listen attentively and compassionately without being distracted or judging you.

Make face-time a priority. Phone calls, social media, and texting are great ways to stay in touch, but they don't replace good old-fashioned in-person quality time. The simple act of talking to someone face to face about how you feel can play a big role in relieving depression and keeping it away.

Try to keep up with social activities even if you don't feel like it. Often when you're depressed, it feels more comfortable to retreat into your shell, but being around other people will make you feel less depressed.

Find ways to support others. It's nice to receive support, but research shows you get an even bigger mood boost from providing support yourself. So find ways—both big and small—to help others: [volunteer](#), be a listening ear for a friend, do something nice for somebody.

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 give you a sense of being needed—both powerful antidotes to depression.

Join a support group for depression. Being with others 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. If going to an in-person support group feels too difficult, some [online therapy platforms](#) offer virtual support groups.

10 tips for connecting with others

01. Talk to one person about your feelings.
02. Help someone else by [volunteering](#).
03. Have lunch or coffee with a friend.
04. Ask a loved one to check in with you regularly.
05. Accompany someone to the movies, a concert, or a small get-together.
06. Call or email an old friend.
07. Go [for a walk](#) with a workout buddy.
08. Schedule a weekly dinner date.

09. [Meet new people](#) by taking a class or joining a club.
10. Confide in a clergy member, teacher, or sports coach.

Tip 2: Do things that make you feel good

In order to overcome depression, you have to do things that relax and energize you. This includes following a healthy lifestyle, learning how to better manage stress, setting limits on what you're able to do, and scheduling fun activities into your day.

Do things you enjoy (or used to)

While you can't force yourself to have fun or experience pleasure, you can 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.

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.

Manage stress

Not only does stress prolong and worsen depression, but it can also trigger it. Figure out all the things in your life that stress you out, such as work overload, money problems, or unsupportive relationships, and find ways to [relieve the pressure and regain control](#).

Create a balanced schedule. It's easy to fall into the trap of spending far more time working or completing chores than in making time for people and activities you enjoy. But to ease stress and avoid burnout, it's important to find a healthy balance. Are there any responsibilities you can give up or delegate to others?

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](#).

Practice gratitude. It sounds simplistic, but taking a few moments to consciously note the things you appreciate in your life can have a notable impact on your stress levels and mood. Even [being grateful](#) for the sun shining or a smile from a neighbor can help you keep things in perspective.

Develop a "wellness toolbox" to deal with depression

Come up with a list of things that you can do for a quick mood boost. The more "tools" for coping with depression you have, the better. Try and implement a few of these ideas each day, even if you're feeling good.

01. Spend some time in nature.
02. List what you like about yourself.
03. Read a good book.
04. Watch a funny movie or TV show.
05. Take a long, hot bath.
06. Meditate.
07. Play with a pet.
08. Talk to friends or family face-to-face.
09. Listen to music.
10. Do something spontaneous and fun.

For more ideas on tools to give your mood a quick, effective boost, read: [I Feel Depressed: 9 Ways to Deal with Depression](#).

Tip 3: Get moving

When you're depressed, just getting out of bed can seem like a daunting task, let alone working out! But [exercise is a powerful depression fighter](#)—and one of the most important tools in your recovery arsenal. Research shows that regular exercise can be as effective as medication for relieving depression symptoms. It also helps prevent relapse once you're well.

To get the most benefit, aim for at least 30 minutes of exercise per day. This doesn't have to be all at once—and it's okay to start small. A 10-minute walk can improve your mood for two hours.

Exercise is something you can do right now to boost your mood

Your fatigue will improve if you stick with it. Starting to exercise can be difficult when you're depressed and feeling exhausted. But research shows that your energy levels will improve if you keep with it. Exercise will help you to feel energized and less fatigued, not more.

Find exercises that are continuous and rhythmic. The most benefits for depression come from [rhythmic exercise](#)—such as walking, weight training, swimming, martial arts, or dancing—where you move both your arms and legs.

Add a mindfulness element, especially if your depression is rooted in [unresolved trauma](#) or fed by obsessive, negative thoughts. [Focus on how your body feels](#) as you move—such as the sensation of your feet hitting the ground, or the feeling of the wind on your skin, or the rhythm of your breathing.

Pair up with an exercise partner. Not only does working out with others enable you to spend time socializing, it can also help to keep you motivated. Try joining a running club, taking a water aerobics or dance class, seeking out tennis partners, or enrolling in a soccer or volleyball league.

Take a dog for a walk. [If you don't own a dog](#), you can volunteer to walk homeless dogs for an animal shelter or rescue group. You'll not only be helping yourself but also be helping to socialize and exercise the dogs, making them more adoptable.

Tip 4: Get a daily dose of sunlight

Sunlight can help boost serotonin levels and improve your mood. Whenever possible, get outside during daylight hours and expose yourself to the sun for at least 15 minutes a day. Remove sunglasses (but never stare directly at the sun) and use sunscreen as needed.

- Take a walk on your lunch break, have your coffee outside, enjoy an al fresco meal, or spend time gardening.
- Double up on the benefits of sunlight by exercising outside. Try hiking, walking in a local park, or playing golf or tennis with a friend.
- Increase the amount of natural light in your home and workplace by opening blinds and drapes and sitting near windows.
- If you live somewhere with little winter sunshine, try using a light therapy box.

Dealing with the winter blues

For some people, the reduced daylight hours of winter lead to a form of depression known as [seasonal affective disorder \(SAD\)](#). SAD can make you feel like a completely different person to who you are in the summer: hopeless, sad, tense, or stressed, with no interest in friends or activities you normally love. No matter how hopeless you feel, though, there are plenty of things you can do to keep your mood stable throughout the year.

Tip 5: Challenge negative thinking

Do you feel like you're powerless or weak? That bad things happen and there's not much you can do about it? That your situation is hopeless? Depression puts a negative spin on everything, including the way you see yourself and your expectations for the future.

[\[Read: How to Stop Worrying\]](#)

When these types of thoughts overwhelm you, it's important to remember that this is a symptom of your depression and these irrational, pessimistic attitudes—known as cognitive distortions—aren't realistic. When you really examine them they don't hold up. But even so, they can be tough to give up. You can't break out of this pessimistic mind frame by telling yourself to "just think positive." Often, it's part of a lifelong pattern of thinking that's become so automatic you're not even completely aware of it. Rather, the trick is to identify the type of negative thoughts that are fueling your depression, and replace them with a more balanced way of thinking.

Negative, unrealistic ways of thinking that fuel depression

All-or-nothing thinking. Looking at things in black-or-white categories, with no middle ground (“If everything is not perfect, I’m a total failure.”)

Overgeneralization. Generalizing from a single negative experience, expecting it to hold true forever (“I had a bad date, I’ll never find anyone.”)

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. (“I got the last question on the test wrong. I’m an idiot.”)

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.”)

Emotional reasoning. Believing that the way you feel reflects reality (“I feel like such a loser. Everyone must be laughing at me!”)

‘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. (“I should never have interviewed for that job. I’m an idiot for thinking I could get it.”)

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

How to challenge negative thinking

Keep a “negative thought log.” Whenever you experience a negative thought, jot it down on your phone or in a notebook—along with what triggered the negative thought. Once you identify the destructive thoughts patterns that contribute to your depression, you can start to challenge them. For example, if your significant other was short with you, you may have automatically assumed that the relationship was in trouble. However, a more realistic way to view it might be that your partner was just having a bad day.

Examine the evidence that your thoughts are true. When challenging your negative thoughts, ask yourself if there is any evidence that your thoughts or beliefs are **not** true? For example, if you’re thinking, “I’ll be stuck in this dead-end job forever,” how realistic is that expectation? Are there facts that you’re ignoring, such as the potential for sending out a resume and interviewing for another job? Is there another, more realistic way of looking at your situation?

Think outside yourself. Ask yourself, “Would I say what I’m thinking about myself to someone else?” If not, stop being so hard on yourself. Think about less harsh statements that offer more realistic descriptions. What would you tell a friend who had the same thought? Instead of labelling yourself a failure or a loser when something doesn’t go as planned, for example, look at things in a more realistic light: you made a mistake, but you can learn from it.

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. We all have bad days and life is often unexpectedly messy. Ask yourself, "How might I look at this situation if I didn't have depression?"

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.

As you cross-examine your negative thoughts, you may be surprised at how quickly they crumble. In the process, you'll develop a more balanced perspective and help to relieve your depression.

Tip 6: Support your health by eating and sleeping well

What you eat has a direct impact on the way you feel. Aim for a balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables, and reduce your intake of food that can adversely affect your mood. This includes caffeine, [alcohol](#), and processed food with high levels of chemical preservatives or hormones (found in some packaged food and cured meats).

Don't skip meals. Going too long between meals can make you feel irritable and tired, so aim to eat something at least every three to four 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](#). Aim to cut out as much of these foods as possible.

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.

Boost your mood with foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids. [Omega-3 fatty acids](#) play an essential role in stabilizing mood. The best sources are fatty fish such as salmon, herring, mackerel, anchovies, sardines, tuna, and some cold-water fish oil supplements.

Improve your sleep

Feeling tired can cause you to think irrationally, increase stress and anxious thoughts, and depress your mood.

Aim for 7-9 hours of sleep each night. 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](#). Try to go to sleep and get up at the same time every day, avoid bright screens within two hours of bedtime, develop a relaxing bedtime routine, and make sure your bedroom is cool, dark, and quiet.

Find healthy ways to get back to sleep. If you wake up in the night, keep the lights low, do a quiet, non-stimulating activity, such as reading a book, or practice a [sleep meditation using guided imagery](#).

When to get professional help for depression

If you've taken self-help steps and made positive lifestyle changes and still find your depression getting 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!

[\[Read: Depression Treatment\]](#)

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.

Authors: Melinda Smith, M.A., Lawrence Robinson, and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D.

Depression hotlines, suicide prevention help

Depression hotlines

In the U.S.	Find DBSA Chapters/Support Groups or call the NAMI Helpline for support and referrals at 1-800-950-6264
UK	Find Depression support groups in-person and online or call the Mind Infoline at 0300 123 3393
Australia	Call the SANE Help Centre at 1800 18 7263
India	Call the Vandrevala Foundation Helpline (India) at 1860 2662 345 or 1800 2333 330
Canada	Call Mood Disorders Society of Canada at 519-824-5565

Suicide prevention help

In the U.S.	Call 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988
UK and Ireland	Call Samaritans UK at 116 123
Australia	Call Lifeline Australia at 13 11 14
Other countries	Visit IASP or Suicide.org to find a helpline near you

More Information

Helpful links

01. [What Causes Depression?](#) - Including genes, temperament, stressful life events, and medical issues. (Harvard Health Publishing)
02. [Depression: Back from the Bluez](#) - Self-help modules for coping with and recovering from depression. (Center for Clinical Interventions)
03. [How Depression Causes Negative 'Spin'](#) - Learn about common cognitive distortions and how to change them. (clinical-depression.co.uk)

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TEEN ISSUES

Cyberbullying: Dealing with Online Bullies

Technology means a cyberbully can harass and intimidate you anywhere and at any time until nowhere feels safe. But there are ways to protect yourself or your child from online bullies.

By [Lawrence Robinson](#) and [Jeanne Segal, Ph.D.](#)

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What is cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying occurs when someone uses the internet, emails, messaging, social media, or other digital technology to harass, threaten, or humiliate another person. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying isn't limited to schoolyards, street corners, or workplaces, but can occur anywhere via smartphones, tablets, and computers, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Cyberbullies don't require face-to-face contact and their bullying isn't limited to just a handful of witnesses at a time. It also doesn't require physical power or strength in numbers.

Cyberbullies can torment you relentlessly and the bullying can follow you anywhere so that no place, not even home, ever feels safe. And with a few clicks the humiliation can be witnessed by hundreds or even thousands of people online.

For those who suffer cyberbullying, the effects can be devastating. Being bullied online can leave you feeling hurt, humiliated, angry, depressed, or even suicidal. But no type of bullying should ever be tolerated.

If you or a loved one is currently the victim of cyberbullying, it's important to remember that you're not alone. Around half of teenagers in the U.S. have suffered from cyberbullying or online harassment and as many as 43 percent of adults working remotely have been bullied online. But whatever your circumstances, there are ways to fightback against cyberbullies, overcome the pain and anguish, and reclaim your sense of identity and self-worth.

Who cyberbullies?

Cyberbullies come in all shapes and sizes. Almost anyone with an internet connection or smartphone can cyberbully someone else, often without having to reveal their true identity. As with face-to-face bullying, all genders cyberbully, but tend to do so in different ways.

Boys tend to bully by “sexting” (sending messages of a sexual nature), posting [revenge porn](#), or with messages that threaten physical harm. Girls, on the other hand, more commonly cyberbully by spreading lies and rumors, exposing your secrets, or by excluding you from social media groups, emails, buddy lists and the like. Because cyberbullying is so easy to perpetrate, a child or teen can easily change roles, going from cyberbullying victim at one point to cyberbully the next, and then back again.

The methods kids and teens use to cyberbully can be as varied and imaginative as the technology they have access to. This could range from sending threatening or taunting messages via email, text, social media, or IM to breaking into your email account or stealing your online identity to hurt and humiliate you. Some cyberbullies may even create a website or social media page to target you.

The effects of cyberbullying

Any type of bullying, in-person or online, can leave you feeling deeply distressed, scared, angry, or ashamed. It can take a heavy toll on your self-esteem and trigger mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. You may feel like you're alone and powerless to make the bullying stop—or even that you're somehow responsible for being bullied.

[\[Read: Deal with a Bully and Overcome Bullying\]](#)

In many cases, though, cyberbullying can be even more painful than face-to-face bullying because:

Cyberbullying can happen anywhere, at any time. You may experience it even in places where you'd normally feel safe, such as your home, and at times when you'd least expect it, like during the weekend in the company of your family. It can seem like there's no escape from the taunting and humiliation.

A lot of cyberbullying can be done anonymously, so you may not be sure who is targeting you. This can make you feel even more threatened and can embolden bullies, as they believe online anonymity means they're less likely to get caught. Since cyberbullies can't see your reaction, they will often go much further in their harassment or ridicule than they would if they were face-to-face with you.

Cyberbullying can be witnessed by potentially thousands of people. Emails, messages, and tweets can be forwarded to many, many people while social media posts or website comments can often be seen by anyone. The more far-reaching the bullying, the more humiliating it can become.

Cyberbullying can often be permanent. Malicious lies or embarrassing images can often remain visible online indefinitely, having long-term consequences on your life, reputation, and well-being.

Cyberbullying and suicide

If cyberbullying leads to you, or someone you know, feeling suicidal, please **call 1-800-273-8255 in the U.S., or visit [IASP](#) or [Suicide.org](#) to find a helpline in your country.**

How to deal with cyberbullying tip 1: Respond to the cyberbully in the right way

If you are targeted by cyberbullies, it's important not to respond to any messages or posts written about you, no matter how hurtful or untrue. Responding will only make the situation worse and provoking a reaction from you is exactly what the cyberbully wants, so don't give them the satisfaction.

It's also very important that you don't seek revenge on a cyberbully by becoming a cyberbully yourself. Again, it will only make the problem worse and could result in serious legal consequences for you. If you wouldn't say it in person, don't say it online.

Instead, respond to cyberbullying by:

Saving the evidence of the cyberbullying. Keep abusive text messages or a screenshot of a webpage, for example, and then report them to a trusted adult, such as a family member, teacher, or school counselor. If you don't report incidents, the cyberbully will often become more aggressive.

Getting help. Talk to a parent, teacher, counselor, or other trusted adult. Seeing a counselor does not mean there is something wrong with you.

Reporting threats of harm and inappropriate sexual messages to the police. In many cases, the cyberbully's actions can be prosecuted by law.

Being relentless. Cyberbullying is rarely limited to one or two incidents. It's far more likely to be a sustained attack on you over a period of time. So, like the cyberbully, you may have to be relentless and keep reporting each and every bullying incident until it stops. There is no reason for you to ever put up with cyberbullying.

Preventing communication from the cyberbully. Block their email address and cell phone number, unfriend or unfollow them, and delete them from your social media contacts. Report their activities to their internet service provider (ISP) or to any social media or other web sites they use to target you. The cyberbully's actions may constitute a violation of the website's terms of service or, depending on the laws in your area, may even warrant criminal charges.

Tip 2: Reevaluate your internet and social media habits

Spending time online, particularly on social media, can help you feel connected to friends and family around the world and find new communities, interests, and outlets for self-expression. However, spending too much time on social media can also have some negative effects.

Whether you're on Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, SnapChat, Instagram, or another platform, heavy social media use can actually make you feel more lonely and isolated, rather than less. It can also impact your self-esteem, exacerbate common mental health problems, lead to feelings of dissatisfaction, sadness, and frustration, and of course, leave you more open to instances of cyberbullying.

Many of us have a fear of missing out (FOMO) if we're not instantly liking, sharing, or responding to social media posts. But the truth is there are very few things that require your immediate response. Constantly checking and rechecking your phone can often be a way to mask other underlying problems, such as boredom, feelings of anxiety or depression, or the need to feel less awkward and alone in social situations.

By changing your focus to offline friends and activities, though, and making a conscious effort to spend less time on social media, you can improve your mood and mental health as well as change how cyberbullying impacts your life.

[\[Read: Social Media and Mental Health\]](#)

Taking a break from social media, [putting away your phone](#), and unplugging from technology can also open you up to meeting new people—especially those who don't spread hurtful rumors, lies, and abuse online.

Tip 3: Find support from those who don't cyberbully

Having trusted people you can turn to for support and reassurance can help you cope with even the most spiteful and damaging experiences of cyberbullying. Reach out to connect with family and real friends or explore ways of [making new friends](#). There are plenty of people who love and appreciate you for who you are.

Share your feelings about cyberbullying. Even if the person you talk to can't provide answers, the simple act of opening up about how you feel to someone who cares about you can make a real difference to your mood and self-esteem. Try talking to a parent, counselor, coach, religious leader, or trusted friend.

Spend time doing things you enjoy. When you spend time pursuing hobbies and interests that bring you joy, cyberbullying can have less significance in your life. Join a sports team, rekindle an old hobby, or hang out with friends who don't participate in bullying.

Find others who share your same values and interests. Many people are cyberbullied for not fitting in with the mainstream. Whether it's your race, sexual orientation, beliefs, or gender that makes you a target, it's important to remember that you're not alone. There are lots of other people who've been through what you're dealing with now, share your values, and will appreciate your individualism. Look for Meetup groups with people who share your interests, join a book group, [volunteer for a cause that's important to you](#), or enroll in a team, youth group, or religious organization where you'll find like-minded people.

Tip 4: View cyberbullying from a different perspective

You can help to ease the pain of cyberbullying by viewing the problem from a different perspective. The cyberbully is a jealous, frustrated person, often trying to escape their own problems. Their goal is to have control over your feelings so that they feel tough and powerful and you feel as unhappy as they do. Don't give them the satisfaction.

Don't blame yourself. No matter what a cyberbully does or says about you, it's important to remember that it's not your fault. Never feel guilty or be ashamed of who you are or what you feel. The cyberbully is the person with the problem, not you.

Don't beat yourself up. Don't make a cyberbullying incident worse by reading the message over and over and punishing yourself further. Life moves so fast online that in a few days or weeks other people will likely have forgotten the incident. Instead, delete any hurtful or abusive messages and focus on the positive, instead. There are many wonderful things about you, so be proud of who you are.

Manage your stress. Experiencing cyberbullying can leave you feeling jittery, nervous, and overwhelmed. But there are healthy ways to [manage stress](#) and build your resilience to the damaging effects of cyberbullying. Exercise, [meditation](#), [muscle relaxation](#), [breathing exercises](#), and positive self-talk are all great ways to relax, burn off frustration, and build mental fortitude against future negative experiences.

[\[Read: Surviving Tough Times by Building Resilience\]](#)

Focus on positive aspects of your life. It's easy to become absorbed by the negativity of cyberbullying and get trapped in a downward spiral. But you can break free of the pessimism and boost your mood and self-esteem by switching your focus to things you like and feel grateful for in your life. These don't have to be huge things; taking a few moments each day to appreciate a kind message from a friend, the love of a family member, or joy of walking in nature can make a real difference to how you feel. Try writing down three things you're grateful for at the end of each day.

Tip 5: Practice body positivity

Offensive name-calling is one of the most common types of cyberbullying, and it's not unusual for bullies to resort to body shaming and weight shaming online. Appearance-based insults can be hurtful to people of any age, but teens may be especially sensitive.

When you're adjusting to the physical changes that come with adolescence, any negative body perceptions you have can be exacerbated when you compare yourself to celebrities or even your own peers. Body-shaming comments from cyberbullies can tear down your self-esteem and have a long-lasting impact. Some research shows that body shaming can even trigger [depression symptoms in teens](#). It's also linked to anxiety and eating disorders.

[\[Read: Body Shaming\]](#)

No matter how unpleasant your experiences, though, boosting your body positivity can help counter the effects of appearance-based cyberbullying.

Focus on what you like about yourself. When an online bully insults you, you may internalize those comments and mistake them for the truth. Take note of your inner voice. Is it simply parroting the bully's words? Are you calling yourself unattractive or inferior? Shift to healthier self-talk by making a few positive statements about yourself. Maybe you love the way your eyes and hair look. You can also build yourself up by acknowledging positive personality traits, such as your kindness or sense of humor.

Practice self-acceptance. New digital tools, such as airbrushing and beauty filters, give people all sorts of ways to alter their appearance online. In fact, social media is filled with manipulated photos as people try to create "idealized" versions of themselves. In the process, this can skew expectations about what we and others should really look like. When a cyberbully criticizes your appearance, you might be tempted to use these tools to hide your imperfections. However, this has the potential to even further damage your self-esteem. Instead, acknowledge that your body is unique and that everyone has flaws, even if they choose to airbrush them out

online.

Begin with body neutrality. If being positive about your appearance feels too difficult, start with a neutral stance. Instead of focusing on your looks, put the emphasis on what your body can do. Make a simple list of things that your body is capable of, whether that includes walking or running a mile or moving furniture. This can be a step towards better accepting and respecting your body.

Keep a healthy relationship with food. Body shaming by cyberbullies can affect how you think about food and your eating habits. Weight-based insults might even lead you to consider unhealthy diet restrictions. But it's important to recognize that food isn't your enemy. Don't allow a cyberbully to have that kind of power over you. Instead, focus on eating a healthy, balanced diet, making mealtimes a happy, social experience, and using [mindful eating techniques](#), such as savoring each bite, to increase your enjoyment of meals.

Tips for parents to stop or prevent cyberbullying

Many kids can be reluctant to tell their parents about cyberbullying out of a fear that doing so may result in losing their cell phone or computer privileges. While parents should always monitor a child's use of technology, it's important not to threaten to withdraw access or otherwise punish a child who's been the victim of cyberbullying.

Spot the warning signs of cyberbullying

Unlike traditional bullying where the bruises are often easily noticeable, it can be harder for parents to spot the signs of cyberbullying. Your child may be a victim if they:

- Seem upset, angry, or otherwise distressed as a result of time spent online or using their phone.
- Appear anxious when receiving a text, message, or social media notification.
- Become secretive about their online and social media activities.
- Refuse to go to school or to specific classes, or avoid group activities.
- Withdraw from friends, group activities, or online and in-person events they used to enjoy.
- Suffer an unusual and sudden drop in performance at school.
- Exhibit changes in behavior, [sleeping](#), and eating patterns, or a decline in mood (such as signs of [depression](#) or [anxiety](#)).

Prevent cyberbullying before it starts

One of the best ways to stop cyberbullying is to prevent the problem before it starts. To stay safe with technology, teach your kids to:

- Refuse to pass along cyberbullying messages.
- Tell their friends to stop cyberbullying.
- Block communication with cyberbullies; delete messages without reading them.
- Never post or share their personal information—or their friends' personal information—online.
- Never share their internet passwords with anyone, except you.
- Talk to you about their life online.
- Not put anything online that they wouldn't want their friends or classmates to see, even in email.
- Not send messages when they're angry or upset.
- Always be as polite online as they are in person.

Monitor your child's technology use

Regardless of how much your child resents it, you can only protect them by monitoring what they do online.

Use parental control apps on your child's smartphone or tablet and set up filters on your child's computer to block inappropriate web content and help you monitor their online activities.

Limit data access to your child's smartphone. Some wireless providers allow you to turn off text messaging services during certain hours.

Insist on knowing your child's passwords and learn the common acronyms kids use online, in social media, and in messaging apps.

Know who your child communicates with online. Go over your child's address book and social media contacts with them. Ask who each person is and how your child knows them.

Encourage your child to tell you or another trusted adult if they receive threatening messages or are otherwise targeted by cyberbullies, while reassuring them that doing so will not result in their loss of phone or computer privileges.

If your child is a cyberbully

It's never easy for a parent to learn that their child is cyberbullying others, but it's important to take action and curb your child's negative behavior before it can have serious repercussions.

If your child has responded to being cyberbullied by employing their own cyberbullying tactics, you can help them to find better ways of dealing with the problem. If your child has trouble managing strong emotions such as anger, hurt, or frustration, talk to a therapist about helping your child learn to cope with these feelings in a healthy way.

[\[Read: Help for Parents of Troubled Teens\]](#)

Cyberbullying is often a learned behavior

Some cyberbullies learn aggressive behavior from their experiences at home, so it's important to set a good example with your own online, social media, and messaging habits. As a parent, you may be setting a bad example for your kids by:

- Sending or forwarding abusive emails, social media posts, or text messages that target coworkers, neighbors, or acquaintances.
- Communicating with people online in ways that you wouldn't do face-to-face.
- Displaying bullying behavior—in-person or online—such as verbally or physically abusing others or intimidating people.

Tips for parents dealing with a child who cyberbullies

Learn about your child's friends and social life. Sometimes a child or teen's friends can encourage their bullying behavior online. By regularly talking to your child about their life and who they're socializing with, the easier it will be to uncover any problems they may be having fitting in or building relationships with others.

Educate your child about cyberbullying. When bullying is done virtually, the bully often doesn't see the consequences of their actions. Often, a child may not understand how hurtful and damaging their behavior online can be to others. As a parent, though, you can help to foster your child's empathy by encouraging them to look at their behavior from the victim's perspective. It's also worth reminding your child that cyberbullying can have serious legal consequences.

Encourage your child to manage stress. Your child's cyberbullying may be an attempt at relieving the stress they're experiencing at home or at school. But there are much healthier ways to let off steam and relieve tension. Try taking up a new sport or physical activity with your child or teaching them how to [practice relaxation techniques](#).

Set limits with technology. Let your child know that you'll be monitoring their online behavior. If necessary, remove access to technology until behavior improves.

Establish consistent rules of behavior. While your child may resent any attempts you make to discipline them, the truth is that the rules and boundaries you set shows your child that they're worthy of your time and

attention.

Bullying and cyberbullying helplines

U.S.	1-800-273-8255 – Crisis Call Center
UK	0845 22 55 787 – National Bullying Helpline
Canada	1-877-352-4497 – BullyingCanada
Australia	1800 551 800 – Kids Helpline
New Zealand	0800 942 8787 – 0800 What'sUp?
India	1098 – Childline India

More Information

Helpful links

01. [Cyberbullying](#) - Tips for teenagers in dealing with cyberbullies. (TeensHealth)
02. [It Gets Better](#) - Videos for LGBT kids and teens. (It Gets Better Project)
03. [Resilience Guide for Parents and Teachers](#) - Building resilience in children. (APA)
04. [Report Cyberbullying](#) - Tips on how and where to report online bullying. (ADL)
05. [Cyberbullying](#) - Tips for parents to help a child being cyberbullied. (KidsHealth)
06. [Cyberbullying Research Center](#) - Offers a list of social media apps, websites, gaming networks, and related companies where you can report instances of cyberbullying.

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DEPRESSION

Depression in Men

Feeling depressed isn't a sign of weakness and you don't have to tough it out. These tips can help you overcome depression and start feeling happier and more hopeful today.

By [Lawrence Robinson](#), [Melinda Smith, M.A.](#) and [Jeanne Segal, Ph.D.](#)

Last updated or reviewed on March 12, 2024

What is male depression?

As men, we like to think of ourselves as strong and in control of our emotions. When we feel hopeless or overwhelmed by despair we often deny it or try to cover it up. But depression is a common problem that affects many of us at some point in our lives, not a sign of emotional weakness or a failing of masculinity.

Depression impacts millions of men of all ages and backgrounds, as well as those who care about them—spouses, partners, friends, and family. Of course, it's normal for anyone to feel down from time to time. Dips in mood are an ordinary reaction to losses, setbacks, and disappointments in life. However, male depression changes how you think, feel, and function in your daily life. It can interfere with your productivity at work or school and impact your relationships, sleep, diet, and overall enjoyment of life. Severe depression can be intense and unrelenting.

Unfortunately, depression in men often gets overlooked as many of us find it difficult to talk about our feelings. Instead, we tend to focus on the physical symptoms that often accompany male depression, such as back pain, headaches, difficulty sleeping, or sexual problems. This can result in the underlying depression going untreated, which can have serious consequences.

Men suffering from depression are four times more likely to take their own lives than women, so it's vital to seek help with depression before feelings of despair become feelings of suicide. Talk honestly with a friend, loved one, or doctor about what's going on in your mind as well as your body. Once correctly diagnosed, there is plenty you can do to successfully treat and manage male depression and prevent it from coming back.

Signs and symptoms of depression in men

Men tend to be less adept at recognizing symptoms of depression than women. A man is more likely to deny his feelings, hide them from himself and others, or try to mask them with other behaviors. And while men may experience classic symptoms of depression such as despondent mood, loss of interest in work or hobbies, weight and sleep disturbances, fatigue, and concentration problems, they are more likely than women to

experience “stealth” depression symptoms such as anger, [substance abuse](#), and agitation.

The three most commonly overlooked signs of depression in men are:

- 01. Physical pain.** Sometimes depression in men shows up as physical symptoms—such as backache, frequent headaches, sleep problems, sexual dysfunction, or digestive disorders—that don’t respond to normal treatment.
- 02. Anger.** This could range from irritability, sensitivity to criticism, or a loss of your sense of humor to road rage, a short temper, or even violence. Some men become abusive or controlling.
- 03. Reckless behavior.** A man suffering from depression may exhibit escapist or risky behavior such as pursuing dangerous sports, driving recklessly, or engaging in unsafe sex. You might drink too much, abuse drugs, or gamble compulsively.

How to know if you’re depressed

If you identify with several of the following, you may be suffering from depression.

- 01.** You feel hopeless and helpless
- 02.** You’ve lost interest in friends, activities, and things you used to enjoy
- 03.** You’re much more irritable, short-tempered, or aggressive than usual
- 04.** You’re consuming more alcohol, engaging in reckless behavior, or [self-medicating](#)
- 05.** You feel restless and agitated
- 06.** Your sleep and appetite has changed
- 07.** You can’t concentrate or your productivity at work has declined
- 08.** You can’t control your negative thoughts

If you're feeling suicidal...

Problems don’t seem temporary—they seem overwhelming and permanent. But if you reach out for help, you will feel better.

Read HelpGuide’s [Suicide Prevention](#) articles or call the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline in the U.S. at 988. For help outside the U.S., visit [Befrienders Worldwide](#).

Triggers for depression in men

There's no single [cause of depression](#) in men. Biological, psychological, and social factors all play a part, as do lifestyle choices, relationships, and coping skills.

While any man can suffer from depression, there are some risk factors that make a man more vulnerable, such as:

- Loneliness and lack of social support
- Inability to effectively deal with stress
- A history of alcohol or drug abuse
- Early childhood trauma or abuse
- [Aging in isolation](#), with few social outlets

Depression and erectile dysfunction

Impotence or [erectile dysfunction](#) is not only a trigger of depression in men, it can also be a side effect of many antidepressant medications.

- Men with sexual function problems are almost twice as likely to be depressed as those without.
- Depression increases the risk of erectile dysfunction.
- Many men are reluctant to acknowledge sexual problems, thinking it's a reflection on their manhood rather than a treatable problem caused by depression.
- Treatment options such as [generic Cialis \(tadalafil\)](#) or [generic Viagra \(sildenafil\)](#) may help to improve your sexual function problems.

Getting help for male depression

Don't try to tough out depression on your own. It takes courage to seek help—from a loved one or a professional. Most men with depression respond well to self-help steps such as reaching out for social support, exercising, switching to a healthy diet, and making other lifestyle changes.

But don't expect your mood to improve instantly. You'll likely begin to feel a little better each day. Many men recovering from depression notice improvements in sleep patterns and appetite before improvements in their mood. But these self-help steps can have a powerful effect on how you think and feel, helping you to overcome the symptoms of depression and regain your enjoyment of life.

Tip 1: Seek social support

Work commitments can often make it difficult for men to find time to maintain friendships, but the first step to tackling male depression is to find people you can really connect with, face-to-face. That doesn't mean simply trading jokes with a coworker or chatting about sports with the guy sitting next to you in a bar. It means finding

someone you feel comfortable sharing your feelings with, someone who'll listen to you without judging you, or telling you how you should think or feel.

You may think that discussing your feelings isn't very macho, but whether you're aware of it or not, you're already communicating your feelings to those around you; you're just not using words. If you're short-tempered, [drinking more than usual](#), or punching holes in the wall, those closest to you will know something's wrong. Choosing to talk about what you're going through, instead, can actually help you feel better.

Finding social support

For many men—especially when you're suffering from depression—reaching out to others can seem overwhelming. But developing and maintaining close relationships are vital to helping you get through this tough time. If you don't feel that you have anyone to turn to, it's never too late to [build new friendships](#) and improve your support network.

How to reach out for depression support

Look for support from people who make you feel safe and cared for. The person you talk to doesn't have to be able to fix you; they just need to be a good listener—someone who'll listen attentively and compassionately without being distracted or judging you.

Make face-time a priority. Phone calls, [social media](#), and texting are great ways to stay in touch, but they don't replace good old-fashioned in-person quality time. The simple act of talking to someone face to face about how you feel can play a big role in [relieving depression](#) and keeping it away.

Try to keep up with social activities even if you don't feel like it. Often when you're depressed, it feels more comfortable to retreat into your shell, but being around other people will make you feel less depressed.

Find ways to support others. It's nice to receive support, but research shows you get an even bigger mood boost from providing support yourself. So find ways—both big and small—to help others: [volunteer](#), be a listening ear for a friend, do something nice for somebody.

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 give you a sense of being needed—both powerful antidotes to depression.

Join a support group for depression. Being with others 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.

Invite someone to a ballgame, movie, or concert. There are plenty of other people who feel just as awkward about reaching out and making friends as you do. Be the one to break the ice.

Call or email an old buddy. Even if you've retreated from relationships that were once important to you, make the effort to reconnect.

Tip 2: Support your health

Positive lifestyle changes can help lift depression and keep it from coming back.

Aim for eight 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.

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 stress you out, such as work overload, [money problems](#), or unsupportive relationships, and find ways to [relieve the pressure and regain control](#).

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](#).

Spend time in sunlight. Getting outside during daylight hours and [exposing yourself to the sun](#) can help boost serotonin levels and improve your mood. Take a walk, have your coffee outside, do some yard work, or double up on the benefits by exercising outdoors. If you live somewhere with little winter sunshine, try using a light therapy box.

Develop a “wellness toolbox” to deal with depression

Come up with a list of things that you can do for a quick mood boost. 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.

01. Spend some time in nature.
02. List what you like about yourself.
03. Read a good book.
04. Watch a funny movie or TV show.
05. Take a long, hot shower.
06. Take care of a few small tasks.
07. Play with a pet.
08. Talk to friends or family face-to-face.
09. Listen to music.
10. Do something spontaneous.

Tip 3: Exercise for greater mental and physical health

When you're depressed, just getting out of bed can seem like a daunting task, let alone working out. But [exercise is a powerful depression fighter](#)—and one of the most important tools in your recovery arsenal.

Research shows that regular exercise can be as effective as medication for relieving depression symptoms. It also helps prevent relapse once you're well.

To get the most benefit, aim for at least 30 minutes of exercise per day. This doesn't have to be all at once—and it's okay to start small. A 10-minute walk can improve your mood for two hours.

Exercise is something you can do right now to boost your mood

Your fatigue will improve if you stick with it. Starting to exercise can be difficult when you're depressed and feeling exhausted. But research shows that your energy levels will improve if you keep with it. [Exercise](#) will help you to feel energized and less fatigued, not more.

Find exercises that are continuous and rhythmic. The most benefits for depression come from rhythmic exercise—such as [walking](#), weight training, swimming, or martial arts—where you move both your arms and legs.

Add a mindfulness element, especially if your depression is rooted in unresolved trauma or fed by obsessive, negative thoughts. Focus on how your body feels as you move—such as the sensation of your feet hitting the ground, or the feeling of the wind on your skin, or the rhythm of your breathing.

Pair up with an exercise partner. Not only does working out with others enable you to spend time socializing, it can also help to keep you motivated. Try joining a running club, seeking out tennis partners, or enrolling in a soccer or volleyball league.

Take a dog for a walk. If don't own a dog, you can volunteer to [walk homeless dogs](#) for an animal shelter or rescue group. You'll not only be helping yourself but also be helping to socialize and exercise the dogs, making them more adoptable.

Tip 4: Eat a healthy diet to improve how you feel

What you eat has a direct impact on the way you feel.

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](#).

Reduce your intake of foods that can adversely affect your mood, such as caffeine, [alcohol](#), trans fats, and foods with high levels of chemical preservatives or hormones.

Eat more Omega-3 fatty acids to give your mood a boost. [The best sources](#) are fatty fish (salmon, herring, mackerel, anchovies, sardines), seaweed, flaxseed, and walnuts.

Try foods rich in mood-enhancing nutrients, such as bananas (magnesium to decrease anxiety, vitamin B6 to promote alertness, tryptophan to boost feel-good serotonin levels) and spinach (magnesium, folate to reduce agitation and improve sleep).

Avoid deficiencies in B vitamins which can trigger depression. Eat more citrus fruit, leafy greens, beans, chicken, and eggs.

Tip 5: Challenge negative thinking

Do you feel like you're powerless or weak? That bad things happen and there's not much you can do about it? That your situation is hopeless? Depression puts a negative spin on everything, including the way you see yourself and your expectations for the future.

When these types of thoughts overwhelm you, it's important to remember that this is a [symptom of your depression](#) and these irrational, pessimistic attitudes—known as cognitive distortions—aren't realistic. When you really examine them they don't hold up. But even so, they can be tough to give up.

You can't break out of this pessimistic mind frame by telling yourself to "just think positive." Often, it's part of a lifelong pattern of thinking that's become so automatic you're not even completely aware of it. Rather, the trick is to identify the type of negative thoughts that are fueling your depression, and replace them with a more balanced way of thinking.

Negative, unrealistic ways of thinking that fuel male 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 ("She must think I'm pathetic") or a fortune teller ("I'll be stuck in this dead-end job forever.")

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. Classifying yourself based on mistakes and perceived shortcomings ("I'm a failure; an idiot; a loser.")

Put your thoughts on the witness stand

Once you identify the destructive thoughts patterns that contribute to your depression, you can start to challenge them with questions such as:

- “What’s the evidence that this thought is true? Not true?”
- “What would I tell a friend who had this thought?”
- “Is there another way of looking at the situation or an alternate explanation?”
- “How might I look at this situation if I didn’t have depression?”

As you cross-examine your negative thoughts, you may be surprised at how quickly they crumble. In the process, you’ll develop a more balanced perspective and help to relieve your depression.

Professional treatment for depression in men

If support from family and friends and positive lifestyle changes aren’t enough, seek help from a mental health professional. Be open about how you’re feeling as well as your physical symptoms. [Treatments for depression](#) in men include:

Therapy. You may feel that talking to a stranger about your problems is ‘unmanly,’ or that therapy carries with it a victim status. However, if [therapy](#) is available to you, it can often bring a swift sense of relief, even to the most skeptical male. You may find that [online therapy](#), done from the comfort of your own home, is a useful option.

Medication. [Antidepressant medication](#) can help relieve some symptoms of depression, but it doesn’t cure the underlying problem and is rarely a long-term solution. Medication also comes with side effects. Even if you decide that medication is right for you, always pursue [self-help steps](#) as well. Therapy and lifestyle changes can address the underlying causes of your depression to prevent it returning when you’re able to come off antidepressants.

How to help a man with depression

It often takes a wife, partner, or other family member to recognize a man’s symptoms of depression. Even if a man suspects he’s depressed, he may be ashamed that he’s unable to cope on his own and only seek help when pressured to do so by a loved one.

Talking to a man about depression

Many men don’t exhibit typical depressive symptoms such as a despondent mood, so you may want to avoid using the word “depression” and try describing his behavior as “stressed” or “overly tired.” It could help him to open up.

Point out how his behavior has changed, without being critical. For example, “You always seem get stomach pains before work,” or “You haven’t played racquetball for months.”

Suggest a general check-up with a physician. He may be less resistant to seeing a family doctor than a mental health specialist at first. The doctor can rule out medical causes of depression and then make a referral.

Offer to accompany him on the first visit with a doctor or mental health specialist. Some men are resistant to talking about their feelings, so try to remove roadblocks to him seeking help.

Encourage him to make a list of symptoms to discuss. Help him focus on his feelings as well as physical ailments, and to be honest about his use of alcohol and drugs.

How to support a man with depression

Engage him in conversation and listen without judgement. Don't disparage any of the feelings he expresses, but do point out realities and offer hope.

Take any remarks about suicide seriously. In the U.S., call the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988 or find a suicide helpline in another country at [Befrienders Worldwide](#).

Invite him for social activities, whether it's simply a walk together or lunch with friends. If your invitation is refused, keep trying.

Encourage him to participate in activities that once gave him pleasure, such as hobbies, sports, or cultural activities. But don't push him to undertake too much too soon.

Don't tell him to 'just snap out of it.' Instead, reassure him that, with time and support, he will start to feel better.

Monitor whether he is taking prescribed medication or attending therapy. If he's prescribed antidepressants, encourage him to follow orders about the use of alcohol.

Remember, you can't "fix" someone else's depression. You're not to blame for your loved one's depression or responsible for his happiness. While your support can be crucial to his recovery, ultimately, it's in his hands.

Depression support, suicide prevention help

Depression support

In the U.S.	Find DBSA Chapters/Support Groups or call the NAMI Helpline for support and referrals at 1-800-950-6264
UK	Find Depression support groups in-person and online or call the Mind Infoline at 0300 123 3393
Australia	Call the SANE Help Centre at 1800 18 7263
Canada	Call Mood Disorders Society of Canada at 519-824-5565
India	Call the Vandrevalla Foundation Helpline (India) at 1860 2662 345 or 1800 2333 330

Suicide prevention help

In the U.S.	Call 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988
UK and Ireland	Call Samaritans UK at 116 123
Australia	Call Lifeline Australia at 13 11 14
Other countries	Visit IASP or Suicide.org to find a helpline near you

More Information

Helpful links

01. [Male depression: Understanding the issues](#) - Signs and symptoms of depression in men and why male depression tends to go undiagnosed. (Mayo Clinic)
02. [Men and Depression](#) - Booklet about depression in men: how it looks, how it feels, getting help, and getting better. (National Institute of Mental Health)

- 03.** [\(VIDEO\) Men and depression: Getting the right treatment](#) - Harvard Health Publishing video exploring how men display symptoms of depression differently and what treatment options are most useful. (YouTube)

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AGING ISSUES

Depression in Older Adults: Signs, Symptoms, Treatment

Depression can happen to any of us as we age, but there are ways to boost how you feel and make your senior years healthy and happy.

By [Lawrence Robinson](#), [Melinda Smith, M.A.](#) and [Jeanne Segal, Ph.D.](#)

Last updated or reviewed on February 5, 2024

Are you an older adult with depression?

Have you lost interest in the activities you used to enjoy? Do you struggle with feelings of helplessness and hopelessness? Are you finding it harder and harder to get through the day? If so, you're not alone. Depression can happen to any of us as we age, regardless of our background or achievements. And the symptoms of elderly depression can affect every aspect of your life, impacting your energy, appetite, sleep, and interest in work, hobbies, and relationships.

Unfortunately, all too many depressed older adults fail to recognize the symptoms of depression, or don't take the steps to get the help they need. There are many reasons why elderly depression is so often overlooked:

- You may assume you have good reason to be down or that depression is just part of aging.
- You may be isolated—which in itself can lead to depression—with few around to notice your distress.
- You may not realize that your physical complaints are signs of depression.
- You may be reluctant to talk about your feelings or ask for help.

It's important to realize that depression isn't an inevitable part of getting older—nor is it a sign of weakness or a character flaw. It can happen to anyone, at any age, no matter your background or your previous accomplishments in life. While life's changes as you age—such as retirement, the death of loved ones, declining health—can sometimes trigger depression, they don't have to keep you down. No matter what challenges you face as you age, there are steps you can take to feel happy and hopeful once again and enjoy your golden years.

Signs and symptoms of depression in older adults

Recognizing depression in the elderly starts with knowing [the signs and symptoms](#). Depression red flags include:

- Sadness or feelings of despair.
- Unexplained or aggravated aches and pains.
- Loss of interest in socializing or hobbies.
- Weight loss or loss of appetite.
- Feelings of hopelessness or helplessness.
- Lack of motivation and energy.
- [Sleep disturbances](#) (difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, oversleeping, or daytime sleepiness).
- Loss of self-worth (worries about being a burden, feelings of worthlessness or self-loathing).
- Slowed movement or speech.
- Increased use of alcohol or [other drugs](#).
- Fixation on death; thoughts of suicide.
- [Memory problems](#).
- Neglecting personal care (skipping meals, forgetting meds, neglecting personal hygiene).

Depressed older adults may not feel “sad”

While depression and sadness might seem to go hand and hand, many depressed seniors claim not to feel sad at all. They may complain, instead, of low motivation, a lack of energy, or physical problems. In fact, physical complaints, such as arthritis pain or worsening headaches, are often the predominant symptom of depression in the elderly.

Is it grief or depression?

As we age, we experience many losses. Loss is painful—whether it’s a loss of independence, mobility, health, your long-time career, or someone you love. [Grieving over these losses is normal and healthy](#), even if the feelings of sadness last for a long time.

Distinguishing between grief and clinical depression isn’t always easy, since they share many symptoms. However, there are ways to tell the difference.

- Grief is a roller coaster involving a wide variety of emotions and a mix of good and bad days. Even when you’re grieving, you’ll still have moments of pleasure or happiness.
- With depression, on the other hand, the feelings of emptiness and despair are constant.
- While there’s no set timetable for grieving, if it doesn’t let up over time or extinguishes all signs of joy—laughing at a good joke, brightening in response to a hug, appreciating a beautiful sunset—it may be depression.

Causes of depression in older adults

As we grow older, we often face significant life changes that can increase the [risk for depression](#). These can include:

Health problems. Illness and disability, chronic or severe pain, cognitive decline, damage to your body image due to surgery or sickness can all be contributors to depression.

[Loneliness and isolation](#). Factors such as living alone, a dwindling social circle due to deaths or relocation, decreased mobility due to illness or a loss of driving privileges can trigger depression.

Reduced sense of purpose. Retirement can bring with it a loss of identity, status, self-confidence, and financial security and increase the risk of depression. Physical limitations on activities you used to enjoy can also impact your sense of purpose.

[\[Read: Adjusting to Retirement: Handling the Stress and Anxiety\]](#)

Fears. These include a fear of death or dying as well as anxiety over [financial problems](#), health issues, or [abuse or neglect](#).

Recent bereavements. The death of friends, family members, and pets, or the [loss of a spouse or partner](#) are common causes of depression in older adults.

Medical conditions that can cause elderly depression

It's important to be aware that medical problems can cause depression in older adults and the elderly, either directly or as a psychological reaction to the illness. Any chronic medical condition, particularly if it is painful, disabling, or life-threatening, can lead to depression or make your depression symptoms worse.

These include:

- [Parkinson's disease](#)
- Stroke
- Heart disease
- Cancer
- Diabetes

- Thyroid disorders
- Vitamin B12 deficiency
- [Dementia](#) and [Alzheimer's disease](#)
- Lupus

→ Multiple sclerosis (MS)

Elderly depression as a side effect of medication

Symptoms of depression can also occur as a side effect of many commonly prescribed drugs. You're particularly at risk if you're taking multiple medications. While the mood-related side effects of prescription medication can affect anyone, older adults are more sensitive because, as we age, our bodies become less efficient at metabolizing and processing drugs.

If you feel depressed after starting a new medication, talk to your doctor. You may be able to lower your dose or switch to another medication that doesn't impact your mood.

Medications that can cause or worsen depression include:

- [Blood pressure](#) medication (e.g. clonidine).
- Beta-blockers (e.g. Lopressor, Inderal).
- High-cholesterol drugs (e.g. Lipitor, Mevacor, Zocor).
- Tranquilizers (e.g. Valium, Xanax, Halcion).
- Calcium-channel blockers.
- Medication for Parkinson's disease.

- [Sleeping pills](#).
- Ulcer medication (e.g. Zantac, Tagamet).
- Heart drugs containing reserpine.
- Steroids (e.g. cortisone and prednisone).
- Painkillers and arthritis drugs.
- Estrogens (e.g. Premarin, Prempro).
- Anticholinergic drugs used to treat GI disorders.

Dementia vs. depression

Never assume that a loss of mental sharpness is just a normal sign of old age. It could be a sign of either depression or [dementia](#), both of which are common in older adults. Depression and dementia share many similar symptoms, including [memory problems](#), sluggish speech and movements, and low motivation, so it can be difficult to tell the two apart.

Is it Depression or Dementia?

Symptoms of Depression	Symptoms of Dementia
Mental decline is relatively rapid	Mental decline happens slowly
Know the correct time, date, and where you are	Be confused and disoriented; become lost in familiar locations
Difficulty concentrating	Difficulty with short-term memory
Language and motor skills are slow, but normal	Writing, speaking, and motor skills are impaired
You notice or worry about memory problems	You don't notice memory problems or seem to care

Whether cognitive decline is caused by dementia or depression, it's important to see a doctor right away. If it's depression, memory, concentration, and energy will bounce back with treatment. Treatment for dementia will also [improve your quality of life](#). And in some types of dementia, symptoms can be reversed, halted, or slowed.

Self-help for elderly depression

It's a myth to think that after a certain age older adults can't learn new skills, try new activities, or make fresh lifestyle changes. The truth is that the human brain never stops changing, so as an older adult, you're just as capable as a young person of learning new things and adapting to new ideas that can help you recover from depression.

[Overcoming depression](#) involves finding new things you enjoy, learning to adapt to change, staying physically and socially active, and feeling connected to your community and loved ones.

Of course, when you're depressed, taking action and putting self-help steps into action can be hard. Sometimes, just thinking about the things you should do to feel better can seem overwhelming. But small steps can make a big difference to how you feel. Taking a short walk, for example, is something you can do right now—and it can boost your mood for the next two hours. By taking small steps day by day, your depression symptoms will ease and you'll find yourself feeling more energetic and hopeful again.

Self-help tip 1: Reach out and stay connected

If you're depressed, you may not want to do anything or see anybody. But isolation only makes depression worse. On your own, it can be difficult to maintain perspective and sustain the effort required to beat depression. That's why support matters—so make an effort to connect to others and limit the time you're alone. If you can't get out to socialize, invite loved ones to visit you, or keep in touch over the phone or email.

But remember: digital communication isn't a replacement for face-to-face contact. Do your best to see people in person on a daily basis. Your mood will thank you! And remember, it's never too late to [build new friendships](#).

Get out in to the world. Try not to stay cooped up at home all day. Go to the park, take a trip to the hairdresser, have lunch with a friend, visit a museum, or go to a concert or a play.

Volunteer your time. [Helping others](#) is one of the best ways to feel better about yourself and expand your social network.

Join a depression support group. Being with others facing the same problems can help reduce your sense of isolation. It can also be inspiring to hear how others cope with depression.

Take care of a pet. A pet can keep you company, and [walking a dog](#), for example, can be good exercise for you and a great way to meet people. Dog owners love to chat while their pets play together.

Take a class or join a club to meet like-minded people. Try joining a senior center, a book club, or another group of people with similar interests.

Create opportunities to laugh. [Laughter provides a mood boost](#), so swap humorous stories and jokes with your loved ones, watch a comedy, or read a funny book.

Tip 2: Find meaning and purpose in life

To overcome depression—and stop it coming back—it's important to continue to feel engaged and enjoy a strong purpose in life. As we age, life changes and you can lose things that previously occupied your time and gave life its meaning. [Retirement](#), the loss of close friends or loved ones, relocating away from your social network, and [changes in your physical health](#), finances, or status can impact your mood, confidence, and sense of self-worth. But there are still plenty of ways you can find new meaning in life and continue to feel engaged in the world. Sometimes it's just a matter of reframing how you think of yourself or the aging process.

Focus on what you can still do, not what you used to be able to do. Maybe you feel frustrated that you're not able to do everything you once could, or at least not to the same levels? Or perhaps negative ideas about growing older have dented your self-confidence? Instead of focusing on what you once did, try focusing on the things you can do. You'll see just how much you still have to offer.

Learn a new skill. Pick something that you've always wanted to learn, or that sparks your imagination and creativity—a musical instrument, a foreign language, or a new game or sport, for example. Learning new activities not only adds meaning and joy to life, but can also help to maintain your brain health and [prevent mental decline](#).

Get involved in your community. Try attending a local event, tutoring kids, or [volunteering](#) for a cause that's important to you. Community work can be a great way of utilizing and passing on the skills you honed in your career—without the commitment or stress of regular employment.

Take pride in your appearance. When you retire, it's easy to let yourself go a little now you don't have to be at work every day. But putting effort into how you look each morning can give your self-confidence a welcome boost and improve how you feel.

Travel. Once you're retired and your kids have left home, you likely have more time on your hands to visit the places you've always wanted to go. Book a vacation to somewhere new or take a weekend trip to a favorite

place. Travel doesn't have to be extravagant or expensive to boost your mood. Enjoy time in nature by taking a scenic [walk](#) or hike, going fishing or camping, or spending a day at the beach.

Write your memoirs, learn to paint, or take up a new craft.

Everyone has different idea about what brings meaning and purpose to life. The important thing is to find activities that are both meaningful and enjoyable for you. The more you nourish your spirit, the better you'll feel.

Tip 3: Adopt healthy habits

When you're depressed, it can be hard to find the motivation to do anything—let alone look after your health. But your health habits have an impact on depression symptoms. The better care you take of your body, the better you'll feel.

Move your body

Exercise is a powerful depression treatment. In fact, research suggests it can be just as effective as antidepressants. And you [don't have to suffer through a rigorous workout](#) to reap the benefits. Take a short walk now and see how much better you feel. Anything that gets you up and moving helps. Look for small ways to add more movement to your day: park farther from the store, take the stairs, do light housework or gardening. It all adds up.

Even if you're ill, frail, or disabled, there are many [safe exercises](#) you can do to build your strength and boost your mood—even from a chair or wheelchair. Just listen to your body and back off if you're in pain.

Eat to support your mood

Adjusting your [dietary habits as an older adult](#) can help you deal with the symptoms of depression.

- Start by [minimizing sugar and refined carbs](#). Sugary and starchy comfort foods can give you a quick boost, but you pay for it later when your blood sugar crashes.
- Instead, focus on quality protein, complex carbs, and [healthy fats](#), which will leave you satisfied and emotionally balanced.
- Going too long without eating can also worsen your mood, making you tired and irritable, so do your best to eat something at least every 3-4 hours.

Support quality sleep

Many older adults [struggle with sleep problems](#), particularly insomnia. But lack of sleep makes depression worse. Aim for somewhere between 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night. You can help yourself get better quality sleep by avoiding alcohol and caffeine, keeping a regular sleep-wake schedule, and making sure your bedroom

is dark, quiet, and cool.

Spend time in sunlight

Sunlight can help boost serotonin levels, improve your mood, and cope with [Seasonal Affective Disorder \(SAD\)](#). Whenever possible, get outside during daylight hours and expose yourself to the sun for at least 15 minutes a day.

- Have your coffee outside or by a window, enjoy an al fresco meal, or spend time gardening.
- Exercise outside by hiking, walking in a local park, or playing golf with a friend.
- If you live somewhere with little winter sunshine, try using a light therapy box.

Alcohol and depression in older adults

It can be tempting to use alcohol to [deal with physical and emotional pain](#). It may help you take your mind off an illness, feel less lonely, or get to sleep. But alcohol makes symptoms of depression and anxiety worse over the long run. It also impairs brain function and interacts in negative ways with numerous medications, including antidepressants. And while drinking may help you nod off, it also keeps you from getting the refreshing deep sleep you need.

Tip 4: Know when to seek professional help

[Depression treatment](#) is just as effective for older adults as it is for younger people. However, since depression in the elderly is often triggered or compounded by a difficult life situation or challenge, any treatment plan should address that issue, too. If loneliness is at the root of your depression, for example, medication alone is not going to cure the problem.

Antidepressant risk factors

Older adults are more sensitive to drug side effects and vulnerable to interactions with other medicines they're taking. Studies have also found that SSRIs such as Prozac can cause rapid bone loss and a higher risk for fractures and falls. Because of these safety concerns, elderly adults on [antidepressants](#) should be carefully monitored.

In many cases, therapy and/or healthy lifestyle changes, such as [exercise](#), can be as effective as antidepressants in relieving depression, without the dangerous side effects.

Counseling and therapy

Therapy works well on depression because it addresses the underlying causes of the depression, rather than just the symptoms.

- **Supportive counseling** includes religious and peer counseling. It can ease loneliness and the hopelessness of depression, and help you find new meaning and purpose.
- **Therapy** helps you work through stressful life changes, heal from losses, and process difficult emotions. It can also help you change negative thinking patterns and develop better coping skills.
- **Support groups** for depression, illness, or bereavement connect you with others who are going through the same challenges. They are a safe place to share experiences, advice, and encouragement.

How to help an older adult with depression

The very nature of depression interferes with a person's ability to seek help, draining energy and self-esteem. For depressed seniors, raised in a time when mental illness was highly stigmatized and misunderstood, it can be even more difficult—especially if they don't believe depression is a real illness, are too proud or ashamed to ask for assistance, or fear becoming a burden to their families.

If an elderly person you care about is depressed, you can make a difference by offering emotional support. Listen to your loved one with patience and compassion. You don't need to try to "fix" someone's depression; just being there to listen is enough. Don't criticize feelings expressed, but point out realities and offer hope. You can also help by seeing that your loved one gets an accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment. Help your loved one find a good doctor, accompany them to appointments, and offer moral support. See [How to Help Someone with Depression](#).

Other tips for helping a depressed elderly loved one

Invite your loved one out. Depression is less likely when people's bodies and minds remain active. Suggest activities to do together that your loved one used to enjoy: walks, an art class, a trip to the movies—anything that provides mental or physical stimulation.

Schedule regular social activities. Group outings, visits from friends and family members, or trips to the [local senior or community center](#) can help combat isolation and loneliness. Be gently insistent if your plans are refused: depressed people often feel better when they're around others.

Plan and prepare healthy meals. A poor diet can make depression worse, so make sure your loved one is eating right, with plenty of fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and some [healthy protein](#) at every meal.

Encourage the person to follow through with treatment. Depression usually recurs when treatment is stopped too soon, so help your loved one keep up with their treatment plan. If it isn't helping, look into other medications and therapies.

Watch for suicide warning signs. Seek immediate professional help if you suspect that your loved one is [thinking about suicide](#).

Depression support, suicide prevention help

Depression support

In the U.S.	Find DBSA Chapters/Support Groups or call the NAMI Helpline for support and referrals at 1-800-950-6264
UK	Find Depression support groups in-person and online or call the Mind Infoline at 0300 123 3393
Australia	Call the SANE Help Centre at 1800 18 7263
Canada	Call Mood Disorders Society of Canada at 519-824-5565
India	Call the Vandrevalla Foundation Helpline (India) at 1860 2662 345 or 1800 2333 330

Suicide prevention help

In the U.S.	Call 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988
UK and Ireland	Call Samaritans UK at 116 123
Australia	Call Lifeline Australia at 13 11 14
Other countries	Visit IASP or Suicide.org to find a helpline near you

More Information

Helpful links

01. [Older Adults and Depression](#) - Signs and treatment of depression in older adults. (National Institute of Mental Health)
02. [Depression in Older Adults](#) - What it feels like, what the risk factors are, and how you can help yourself. (Royal College of Psychiatrists)
03. [Antidepressant Use Linked to Bone Loss](#) - Covers two Archives of Internal Medicine studies on the connection between SSRI use in adults over 65 and abnormal bone loss. (National Institutes of Health)

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DEPRESSION

Depression in Women

Feeling empty, sad, helpless? Learn about the signs, symptoms, and causes of female depression—and what you can do to recover.

By [Melinda Smith, M.A.](#), [Lawrence Robinson](#) and [Jaelline Jaffe, Ph.D.](#)

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Understanding depression in women

Depression can impact every area of a woman's life—including your physical health, social life, relationships, career, and sense of self-worth—and is complicated by factors such as reproductive hormones, social pressures, and the unique female response to stress. However, it's important to know that you're not alone. Women are about twice as likely as men to suffer from depression but depression is treatable and there are plenty of things you can do to make yourself feel better.

Of course, the Catch-22 of depression is that feeling better requires action but taking action when you're depressed is difficult. However, while you may not have much energy, you probably have enough to take a short walk around the block or pick up the phone to call a loved one, for example—and that can be a great start to boosting your mood and improving your outlook. It's important to also learn about the factors that cause depression in women so you can tackle the condition head on, treat your depression most effectively, and help prevent it from coming back.

Signs and symptoms of depression in women

The symptoms of depression in women vary from mild to severe (major depression) and are distinguished by the impact they have on your ability to function. [Common signs of depression](#) include:

- Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. You feel as if nothing will ever get better and there's nothing you can do to improve your situation.
- You don't care anymore about former hobbies, pastimes, and social activities you used to enjoy.
- Appetite changes often leading to significant weight loss or weight gain.
- Changes in your sleep pattern.
- Feeling angry, agitated, restless.

- Feeling fatigued, sluggish, and drained of energy.
- Trouble concentrating, making decisions, or remembering things.
- Increase in aches and pains, including headaches, cramps, breast tenderness, or bloating.
- Suicidal thoughts.

Women also tend to experience certain depression symptoms more often than men. These include:

- **Depression in the winter months** ([seasonal affective disorder](#)) due to lower levels of sunlight.
- **Symptoms of atypical depression**, where rather than sleeping less, eating less, and losing weight, you experience the opposite: sleeping excessively, eating more (especially [refined carbohydrates](#)), and gaining weight.
- **Strong feelings of guilt and worthlessness.** You harshly criticize yourself for perceived faults and mistakes.

If you're feeling suicidal...

Problems don't seem temporary—they seem overwhelming and permanent. But if you reach out for help, you will feel better.

Read [Are You Feeling Suicidal?](#) or call the [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) at 988. For helplines outside the U.S., visit [Befrienders Worldwide](#).

Causes of depression in women

Women report experiencing depression at much higher rates than men. This gender disparity may be explained by a number of [social, biological, and hormonal factors](#) that are specific to women.

Premenstrual problems. Hormonal fluctuations during the menstrual cycle can cause the familiar symptoms of premenstrual syndrome (PMS), such as bloating, irritability, fatigue, and emotional reactivity. For some women, symptoms are severe and disabling and may warrant a diagnosis of [premenstrual dysphoric disorder \(PMDD\)](#). PMDD is characterized by severe depression, irritability, and other mood disturbances beginning about 10 to 14 days before your period and improving within a few days of its start.

Pregnancy and infertility. The many hormonal changes that occur during pregnancy can contribute to depression, particularly in women already at high risk. Other issues relating to pregnancy such as miscarriage, unwanted pregnancy, and infertility can also play a role in depression.

Postpartum depression. It's not uncommon for new mothers to experience the "baby blues." This is a normal reaction that tends to subside within a few weeks. However, some women experience severe, lasting depression. This condition is called [postpartum depression](#) and is thought to be influenced, at least in part, by

hormonal fluctuations.

Menopause and perimenopause. Women may be at increased risk for depression during perimenopause, the stage leading to menopause when reproductive hormones rapidly fluctuate. Women with past histories of depression are at an increased risk of depression during menopause as well.

The female physiological response to stress. Women produce more stress hormones than men, and the female sex hormone progesterone prevents the stress hormone system from turning itself off as it does in men. This can make women more susceptible to developing depression triggered by stress.

Body image issues which increase in girls during the sexual development of puberty may contribute to depression in adolescence.

Thyroid problems. Since hypothyroidism can cause depression, this medical problem should always be ruled out by a physician.

Medication side effects from birth control medication or hormone replacement therapy.

Health problems. Chronic illness, injury, or disability can lead to depression in women, as can crash dieting or quitting smoking.

Other common causes of depression include:

- Loneliness and isolation; a lack of social support.
- Family history of depression.
- Early childhood trauma or abuse.
- Alcohol or drug abuse.
- Marital or relationship problems; balancing the pressures of career and home life.
- Family responsibilities such as caring for children, spouse, or aging parents.
- Experiencing discrimination at work or not reaching important goals, losing or changing a job, retirement, or embarking on military service.
- Persistent money problems.
- Death of a loved one or other stressful life event that leaves you feeling useless, helpless, alone, or profoundly sad.

Compensating for biological and hormonal causes of depression

Because biology and hormone fluctuations can play such a prominent role in affecting a women's depression, it may be helpful to make use of more coping strategies at hormonal low points during the month. Try keeping a log of where you are in your menstrual cycle and how you are feeling—physically and emotionally. This way you will be able to better anticipate when you need to compensate for the hormonal lows and reduce or avoid the resulting symptoms.

It is important to remember that depression, at any stage in life and for any reason, is serious and should be taken seriously. Just because you've been told that your symptoms are a "normal" part of being a woman does not mean you have to suffer in silence. There are many things you can do to treat your depression and feel better.

How to feel better tip 1: Reach out for social support

You can make a huge dent in your depression with simple but powerful self-help steps. Feeling better takes time and effort when you don't feel like making an effort. But you can get there if you make positive choices for yourself each day and draw on the support of others.

Getting support from people who care about you plays an essential role in overcoming depression. On your own, it can be difficult to maintain a healthy perspective and sustain the effort required to beat depression. At the same time, the very nature of depression makes it difficult to reach out for help. When you're depressed, the tendency is to withdraw and isolate, while an irritable mood brought on by depression can cause you to lash out over situations that wouldn't normally bother you, further distancing you from others.

Ask for the help and support you need and share what you're going through with the people you love and trust. You may have neglected your most treasured relationships, but they can get you through this tough time. If you don't feel that you have anyone to confide in, you can find help to [build new friendships](#)—even if you're shy or introverted.

How to reach out for support

Look for support from people who make you feel safe and cared for. The person you talk to doesn't have to be able to fix you; they just need to be a good listener—someone who'll listen attentively and compassionately without being distracted or judging you.

Make face-time a priority. Phone calls, [social media](#), and texting are great ways to stay in touch, but they don't replace good old-fashioned in-person quality time. The simple act of talking to someone face to face about how you feel can play a big role in relieving depression and keeping it away.

Try to keep up with social activities even if you don't feel like it. Often when you're depressed it feels more comfortable to retreat into your shell, but being around other people will make you feel less depressed.

Find ways to support others. It's nice to receive support, but research shows you get an even bigger mood boost from providing support yourself. So, find ways—both big and small—to help others: [volunteer](#), be a listening ear for a friend, do something nice for somebody.

Join a support group for depression. Being with others 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.

Tip 2: Support your health

In order to overcome depression, you have to do things that relax and energize you. This includes following a healthy lifestyle, learning how to better manage stress, setting limits on what you're able to do, and scheduling fun activities into your day.

Aim for eight hours of sleep. Depression typically involves sleep problems; whether you're sleeping too little or too much, your mood suffers. But you can get on a better sleep schedule by adopting [healthy sleep habits](#).

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 stress you out, such as work overload, money problems, or unsupportive relationships, and find ways to [relieve the pressure and regain control](#).

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 give 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 push yourself to do things, even when you don't feel like it. 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.

Develop a “wellness toolbox” to deal with depression

Come up with a list of things that you can do for a quick mood boost. 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.

01. Spend some time in nature.
02. List what you like about yourself.
03. Read a good book.
04. Watch a funny movie or TV show.
05. Take a long, hot bath.
06. Take care of a few small tasks.
07. Play with a pet.
08. Talk to friends or family face-to-face.
09. Listen to music.
10. Do something spontaneous.

Tip 3: Get up and get moving

When you're depressed, just getting out of bed can seem like a daunting task, let alone working out! But exercise is a powerful depression fighter—and one of the most important tools for depression recovery.

Studies show that [regular exercise can be as effective as antidepressant medication](#) at increasing energy levels and decreasing feelings of fatigue. You don't even have to hit the gym. A 30-minute walk each day will give you a much-needed boost. And if you can't manage 30 minutes, three 10-minute bursts of movement throughout the day are just as effective.

Exercise is something you can do right now to boost your mood

Your fatigue will improve if you stick with it. Starting to exercise can be difficult when you're depressed and feeling exhausted. But research shows that your energy levels will improve if you keep with it. Exercise will help you to feel energized and less fatigued, not more.

Find exercises that are continuous and rhythmic. The most benefits for depression come from rhythmic exercise—such as walking, weight training, swimming, martial arts, or dancing—where you move both your arms and legs.

Add a mindfulness element, especially if your depression is rooted in unresolved trauma or fed by obsessive, negative thoughts. Focus on how your body feels as you move—such as the sensation of your feet hitting the ground, or the feeling of the wind on your skin, or the rhythm of your breathing.

Pair up with an exercise partner. Not only does working out with others enable you to spend time socializing, it can also help to keep you motivated. Try joining a running club, taking a water aerobics or dance class, seeking out tennis partners, or enrolling in a soccer or volleyball league.

Walk a dog. If you don't own a dog, you can [volunteer](#) to walk homeless dogs for an animal shelter or rescue group. You'll not only be helping yourself but also be helping to socialize and exercise the dogs, making them more adoptable.

Tip 4: Eat a healthy, depression-fighting diet

What you eat has a direct impact on the way you feel. Some women find dietary modifications, nutritional supplements and herbal remedies can help aid in the relief of depression symptoms. These include:

Cutting back on salt, unhealthy fats, caffeine, sugar/refined carbs, and alcohol can help improve depression symptoms.

Not skipping meals. Going too long between meals can make you feel irritable and tired, so aim to eat something at least every three to four hours.

Boosting your B vitamins. Deficiencies in B vitamins such as folic acid and B-12 can trigger depression. To increase your intake, eat more citrus fruit, leafy greens, beans, chicken, and eggs. Vitamin B-6 along with calcium, magnesium, Vitamin E, and tryptophan have all been shown to benefit women suffering from PMDD.

Eating foods with Omega-3 fatty acids. [Omega-3 fatty acids](#) play an essential role in stabilizing mood. The best sources are fatty fish such as salmon, herring, mackerel, anchovies, sardines, and tuna, or vegetarian options such as seaweed, flaxseed, and walnuts.

Making sure you're getting enough iron. Low iron levels can produce common depression symptoms like irritability, fatigue, and difficulty concentrating. Iron rich foods to add to your diet include red meat, beans, leafy greens and dried fruit.

Adding herbal supplements may be helpful. Primrose oil and chaste tree berry have both been found to be effective in the treatment of PMDD.

Tip 5: Get a daily dose of sunlight

Sunlight can help boost serotonin levels and improve your mood. Aim for at least 15 minutes of sunlight a day. Remove sunglasses (but never stare directly at the sun) and use sunscreen as needed.

- Take a walk on your lunch break, have your coffee outside, enjoy an al fresco meal, people-watch on a park bench, or spend time gardening.
- Double up on the benefits of sunlight by exercising outside. Try hiking, walking in a local park, or playing golf or tennis with a friend.
- Increase the amount of natural light in your home and workplace by opening blinds and drapes and sitting near windows.
- If you live somewhere with little winter sunshine, try using a light therapy box.

Dealing with the winter blues

The reduced daylight hours of winter lead to a form of depression known as [seasonal affective disorder \(SAD\)](#). Women are diagnosed with SAD at four times the rate of men. SAD can make you feel like a completely different person to who you are in the summer: hopeless, sad, tense, or stressed, with no interest in friends or activities you normally love. No matter how bad you feel, though, there are plenty of things you can do to keep your mood stable throughout the year.

Tip 6: Challenge negative thinking

Depression puts a negative spin on everything, including the way you see yourself and your expectations for the future. When these types of thoughts overwhelm you, it's important to remember that this is a symptom of your depression and these irrational, pessimistic attitudes—known as cognitive distortions—aren't realistic.

Women also tend to ruminate when we're depressed, perhaps spending hours trying to figure out why we're feeling this way. However, rumination can maintain depression or even make it worse. You can't break out of this pessimistic mind frame by just telling yourself to "think positive." Often, it's part of a lifelong pattern of thinking that's become so automatic you're not even completely aware of it.

You can develop a more balanced way of thinking by identifying the type of negative thoughts that are contributing to your depression, and then learning to replace them with a more balanced way of thinking.

Negative, unrealistic ways of thinking that fuel 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 (“He said he had a good time on our date, but I think he was just being nice.”)

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

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

Challenge your negative thinking

Once you identify the destructive thought patterns that contribute to your depression, you can start to challenge them with questions such as:

- “What’s the evidence that this thought is true? Not true?”
- “What would I tell a friend who had this thought?”
- “Is there another way of looking at the situation or an alternate explanation?”
- “How might I look at this situation if I didn’t have depression?”

As you cross-examine your negative thoughts, you may be surprised at how quickly they crumble. For example, the negative thought: “My boss hates me. He gave me this difficult report to complete,” could be replaced with: “My boss must have a lot of faith in me to give me so much responsibility.” In the process of challenging negative thoughts, you’ll develop a more balanced perspective and help to relieve your depression.

Get professional help if needed

If you don't benefit sufficiently from [self-help treatments](#), seek help from a mental health professional. While women suffering from depression respond to the same types of treatment as men, specific aspects of treatment are often modified for women. Women are also more likely to require simultaneous treatment for other conditions such as anxiety or eating disorders.

Therapy. Talk therapy is an extremely effective treatment for depression. It can provide you with the skills and insight to relieve depression symptoms and help prevent depression from coming back. One of the most important things to consider when choosing a therapist is your connection with this person. [The right therapist](#) will be a caring and supportive partner in your depression treatment and recovery.

Medication. [Antidepressant medication](#) may help relieve some symptoms of depression in women, but it won't cure the underlying problem. Because of female biological differences, women are generally started on lower doses of antidepressants than men. Women are also more likely to experience side effects, so any medication use should be closely monitored. Don't rely on a doctor who is not trained in mental health for guidance on medication, and remember that medication works best when you make healthy lifestyle changes as well.

Depression support, suicide prevention help

Depression support

In the U.S.	Find DBSA Chapters/Support Groups or call the NAMI Helpline for support and referrals at 1-800-950-6264
UK	Find Depression support groups in-person and online or call the Mind Infoline at 0300 123 3393
Australia	Call the SANE Help Centre at 1800 18 7263
Canada	Call Mood Disorders Society of Canada at 519-824-5565
India	Call the Vandrevalla Foundation Helpline (India) at 1860 2662 345 or 1800 2333 330

Suicide prevention help

In the U.S.	Call 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988
UK and Ireland	Call Samaritans UK at 116 123
Australia	Call Lifeline Australia at 13 11 14
Other countries	Visit IASP or Suicide.org to find a helpline near you

More Information

Helpful links

01. [Depression in women: Understanding the gender gap](#) - The biological, psychosocial, and cultural factors that may increase a woman's risk for depression. (Mayo Clinic)
02. [PMDD/PMS](#) - Premenstrual mood changes, including premenstrual dysphoric disorder. (Massachusetts General Hospital, Center for Women's Health)
03. [Antidepressants: Safe during pregnancy?](#) - Risks of taking antidepressants during pregnancy. (Mayo Clinic)
04. [Mood Disorders and Teenage Girls](#) - Discusses why girls are more vulnerable to mood disorders and what signs and symptoms you should look for in adolescent girls. (Child Mind Institute)
05. [Depression During the Transition to Menopause: A Guide for Patients and Families](#) - Estrogen interacts with chemicals in the brain that can affect mood. (womensmentalhealth.org)

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DEPRESSION

Depression Treatment

Therapy, medication, self-help? If you're confused by all the different treatment options for depression, here's how to decide the best approach for you.

By [Melinda Smith, M.A.](#), [Lawrence Robinson](#) and [Jeanne Segal, Ph.D.](#)

Last updated or reviewed on February 5, 2024

Finding the best depression treatment for you

When you're depressed, it can feel like you'll never get out from under a dark shadow. However, even the most severe depression is treatable. So, if your depression is keeping you from living the life you want to, don't hesitate to seek help. From therapy to medication to healthy lifestyle changes, there are many different treatment options available.

Of course, just as no two people are affected by depression in exactly the same way, neither is there a "one size fits all" treatment to cure depression. What works for one person might not work for another. By becoming as informed as possible, though, you can find the treatments that can help you overcome depression, feel happy and hopeful again, and reclaim your life.

Depression treatment tips

Learn as much as you can about your depression. It's important to determine whether your [depression symptoms](#) are due to an underlying medical condition. If so, that condition will need to be treated first. The [severity of your depression](#) is also a factor. The more severe the depression, the more intensive the treatment you're likely to need.

It takes time to find the right treatment. It might take some trial and error to find the treatment and support that works best for you. For example, if you decide to pursue therapy it may take a few attempts to find a therapist that you really click with. Or you may try an antidepressant, only to find that you don't need it if you take a daily half hour walk. Be open to change and a little experimentation.

Don't rely on medications alone. Although medication can relieve the symptoms of depression, it is not usually suitable for long-term use. Other treatments, including exercise and therapy, can be just as effective as medication, often even more so, but don't come with unwanted side effects. If you do decide to try medication, remember that medication works best when you make healthy lifestyle changes as well.

Get social support. The more you [cultivate your social connections](#), the more protected you are from depression. If you are feeling stuck, don't hesitate to talk to trusted family members or friends, or seek out new connections at a depression support group, for example. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness and it won't mean you're a burden to others. Often, the simple act of talking to someone face-to-face can be an enormous help.

Treatment takes time and commitment. All of these depression treatments take time, and sometimes it might feel overwhelming or frustratingly slow. That is normal. Recovery usually has its ups and downs.

Lifestyle changes: An essential part of depression treatment

Lifestyle changes are simple but powerful tools in the treatment of depression. Sometimes they might be all you need. Even if you need other treatment as well, [making the right lifestyle changes](#) can help lift depression faster—and prevent it from coming back.

Lifestyle changes to treat depression

Exercise. [Regular exercise can be as effective at treating depression as medication.](#) Not only does exercise boost serotonin, endorphins, and other feel-good brain chemicals, it triggers the growth of new brain cells and connections, just like antidepressants do. Best of all, you don't have to train for a marathon in order to reap the benefits. Even a half-hour daily walk can make a big difference. For maximum results, aim for 30 to 60 minutes of aerobic activity on most days.

Social support. Strong social networks reduce isolation, a key risk factor for depression. Keep in regular contact with friends and family, or consider joining a class or group. [Volunteering](#) is a wonderful way to get social support and help others while also helping yourself.

Nutrition. Eating well is important for both your physical and mental health. Eating small, well-balanced meals throughout the day will help you keep your energy up and minimize mood swings. While you may be [drawn to sugary foods](#) for the quick boost they provide, complex carbohydrates are a better choice. They'll get you going without the all-too-soon sugar crash.

Sleep. Sleep has a strong effect on mood. When you don't get enough sleep, your depression symptoms will be worse. Sleep deprivation exacerbates irritability, moodiness, sadness, and fatigue. [Make sure you're getting enough sleep each night.](#) Very few people do well on less than seven hours a night. Aim for somewhere between seven to nine hours each night.

Stress reduction. [Make changes in your life to help manage and reduce stress.](#) Too much stress exacerbates depression and puts you at risk for future depression. Take the aspects of your life that stress you out, such as work overload or unsupportive relationships, and find ways to minimize their impact.

Ruling out medical causes of depression

If you suspect that you may be depressed, and lifestyle changes haven't worked, make an appointment to see your primary care doctor for a thorough checkup. If your depression is the result of medical causes, therapy and antidepressants will do little to help. The depression won't lift until the underlying health problem is identified

and treated.

Your doctor will check for medical conditions that mimic depression, and also make sure you are not taking medications that can cause depression as a side effect. Many medical conditions and medications can [cause symptoms of depression](#), including sadness, fatigue, and the loss of pleasure. Hypothyroidism, or underactive thyroid, is a particularly common mood buster, [especially in women](#). Older adults, or anyone who takes many different medications each day, are at risk for drug interactions that cause symptoms of depression. The more medications you are taking, the greater the risk for drug interactions.

Psychotherapy for depression treatment

If there is no underlying medical cause for your symptoms of depression, talk therapy can be an extremely effective treatment. What you learn in therapy gives you skills and insight to feel better and help prevent depression from coming back.

There are many types of therapy available. Three of the more common methods used in depression treatment include cognitive behavioral therapy, interpersonal therapy, and psychodynamic therapy. Often, a blended approach is used.

[\[Read: Online Therapy: Is it Right for You?\]](#)

Some types of therapy teach you practical techniques on how to [reframe negative thinking](#) and employ behavioral skills in combating depression. Therapy can also help you work through the root of your depression, helping you understand why you feel a certain way, what your triggers are for depression, and what you can do to stay healthy.

Therapy and “the big picture” in depression treatment

One of the hallmarks of depression is feeling overwhelmed and having trouble focusing. Therapy helps you step back and see what might be contributing to your depression and how you can make changes. Here are some of the “big picture” themes that therapy can help with:

Relationships. [Understanding the patterns of your relationships](#), building better relationships, and improving current relationships will help reduce isolation and build social support, important in preventing depression.

Setting healthy boundaries. If you are stressed and overwhelmed, and feel like you just can't say no, you are more at risk for depression. Setting healthy boundaries in relationships and at work can help relieve stress, and therapy can help you identify and validate the boundaries that are right for you.

Handling life's problems. Talking with a trusted therapist can provide good feedback on more positive ways to handle life's challenges and problems.

Individual or group therapy?

When you hear the word “therapy” you might automatically think of one-on-one sessions with a therapist. However, group therapy can be very useful in depression treatment as well. Both group and individual therapy sessions usually last about an hour. What are the benefits of each? In individual therapy, you are building a strong relationship with one person, and may feel more comfortable sharing some sensitive information with one person than with a group. You also get individualized attention.

In group therapy, listening to peers going through the same struggles can validate your experiences and help build self-esteem. Often group members are at different points in their depression, so you might get tips from both someone in the trenches and someone who has worked through a challenging problem. As well as offering inspiration and ideas, attending group therapy can also help increase your social activities and network.

When the going gets tough in therapy...

As with remodeling a house, when you take apart things that haven't worked well in your life, it often makes them seem worse before they get better. When therapy seems difficult or painful, don't give up. If you discuss your feelings and reactions honestly with your therapist, it will help you move forward rather than retreat back to your old, less effective ways. However, if the connection with your therapist consistently starts to feel forced or uncomfortable, don't be afraid to explore other options for therapy as well. A strong trusting relationship is the foundation of good therapy.

Finding a therapist

One of the most important things to consider when choosing a therapist is your connection with this person. [The right therapist will be a caring and supportive partner](#) in your depression treatment and recovery.

There are many ways to find a therapist:

- Word of mouth is one of the best ways to find a good therapist. Your friends and family may have some ideas, or your primary care doctor may be able to provide an initial referral.
- National mental health organizations can also help with referral lists of licensed credentialed providers.
- If cost is an issue, check out local senior centers, religious organizations, and community mental health clinics. Such places often offer therapy on a sliding scale for payment.
- To find an online therapist, read our roundup of the [Best Online Therapy Platforms](#).

Medication for depression

Depression medication may be the most advertised treatment for depression, but that doesn't mean it is the most effective. Depression is not just about a chemical imbalance in the brain. Medication may help relieve some of the symptoms of moderate and severe depression, but it doesn't cure the underlying problem, and it's usually not a long-term solution. Antidepressant medications also come with side effects and safety concerns, and withdrawal can be very difficult. If you're considering whether antidepressant medication is right for you, [learning all the facts can help you make an informed decision](#).

Even if you decide to take medication for depression, don't ignore other treatments. Lifestyle changes and therapy not only help speed recovery from depression, but also provide skills to help prevent a recurrence.

TMS therapy for depression

If you're suffering from major depression that has been resistant to therapy, medication, and self-help, then TMS therapy may be an option. [Transcranial magnetic stimulation \(TMS\) therapy](#) is a noninvasive treatment that directs recurring magnetic energy pulses at the regions of the brain that are involved in mood. These magnetic pulses pass painlessly through the skull and stimulate brain cells which can improve communication between different parts of the brain and ease depression symptoms.

While TMS may be able to improve treatment-resistant depression, that doesn't mean it's a cure for depression or that your symptoms won't return. However, it could provide sufficient improvements in your energy and drive to enable you to begin talk therapy or make the lifestyle changes—such as improving your diet, exercising, and building your support network—that can help preserve your depression recovery in the long term.

ECT for depression

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is another noninvasive procedure that may help with depression that's resistant to psychotherapy, medication, and self-help. During ECT, electrodes deliver mild electrical pulses to parts of your brain. This triggers a brief seizure and flurry of brain cell activity. The procedure results in short-term relief from depression, but researchers aren't entirely sure why. The therapeutic effect could be due to factors like changes in blood flow in the brain or the growth of new neurons.

Research indicates that ECT may be more effective than TMS in treating depression in the short term. However, ECT also seems to come with a higher risk of side effects, including memory impairment and headaches.

To learn more about the potential benefits and drawbacks to ECT, read [Electroconvulsive Therapy \(ECT\): How it Works and What to Expect](#).

Alternative and complementary treatments

Alternative and complementary treatments for depression may include vitamin and herbal supplements, acupuncture, and relaxation techniques, such as [mindfulness meditation](#), yoga, or tai chi.

Vitamins and supplements for depression

The jury is still out on how well herbal remedies, vitamins, or supplements work in treating depression. While many supplements are widely available over the counter, in many cases their efficacy has not been scientifically proven. If your depression symptoms are in part due to nutritional deficiency, you may benefit from [vitamin supplements](#), but this should be on the advice of your healthcare professional.

If you decide to try natural and herbal supplements, remember that they can have side effects and drug or food interactions. For example, St. John's Wort—a promising herb used for treatment of mild to moderate depression—can interfere with prescription drugs such as blood thinners, birth control pills, and prescription antidepressants. Make sure your doctor or therapist knows what you are taking.

Other alternative treatments

Relaxation techniques. As well as helping to relieve symptoms of depression, [relaxation techniques](#) may also reduce stress and boost feelings of joy and well-being. Try yoga, deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or [meditation](#).

Acupuncture. Acupuncture, the technique of using fine needles on specific points on the body for therapeutic purposes, is increasingly being investigated as a treatment for depression, with some research studies showing promising results. If you decide to try acupuncture, make sure that you find a licensed qualified professional.

Depression support, suicide prevention help

Depression support

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Australia	Call the SANE Help Centre at 1800 18 7263
Canada	Call Mood Disorders Society of Canada at 519-824-5565
India	Call the Vandrevala Foundation Helpline (India) at 1860 2662 345 or 1800 2333 330

Suicide prevention help

In the U.S.	Call 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988
UK and Ireland	Call Samaritans UK at 116 123
Australia	Call Lifeline Australia at 13 11 14
Other countries	Visit IASP or Suicide.org to find a helpline near you

More Information

Helpful links

01. [Psychotherapy works](#) - Articles, tips sheets and other information to better understand psychotherapy and how it works. (American Psychological Association)
02. [Depression: Back from the Bluez](#) - Self-help modules for coping with and recovering from depression. (Center for Clinical Interventions)
03. [Treatment Options](#) - Explore the different treatments available for depression. (Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance)

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Depression:
**Parents'
Medication Guide**

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF
CHILD & ADOLESCENT
PSYCHIATRY

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PSYCHIATRIC
ASSOCIATION



Depression Parents' Medication Guide Work Group

CHAIR:

Graham J. Emslie, MD

MEMBERS:

Teri Brister, PhD, LPC, Representative from National Alliance on Mental Illness

Meredith Chapman, MD

Mina K. Dulcan, MD

Cathryn A. Galanter, MD

Jessica M. Jones, MA, LPA

Beth Kennard, PsyD

Jerry Pavlon-Blum, Representative from Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

Theodore A. Petti, MD, MPH

Adelaide S. Robb, MD

Timothy E. Wilens, MD

STAFF:

Carmen J. Head, MPH, CHES, Director, Research, Development, & Workforce

Sarah Hellwege, MEd, Assistant Director, Research, Training, & Education

CONSULTANT:

Esha Gupta, Medical Science Writer

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry promotes the healthy development of children, adolescents, and families through advocacy, education, and research. Child and adolescent psychiatrists are the leading physician authority on children's mental health.



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Introduction

The original Parents Medical Guide on treating depression was published in 2005, and a revision was published in 2010, through collaboration by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) and the American Psychiatric Association (APA). The current revision has been updated to include new research on effective treatments for child and adolescent depression. The goal of this guide is to help parents make informed decisions about getting the best care for a child or adolescent with depression.

What is depression?

Depression is a serious illness that can affect almost every part of a young person's life and significantly impact his or her family.

Depression is a type of mood disorder that can damage relationships among family members and friends, harm school performance, and limit other educational opportunities. Depression can negatively affect eating, sleeping, and physical activity. Because it can result in so many health problems, it is important to recognize the signs of depression and get the right treatment. When depression is treated successfully, most children can get back on track with their lives.

Although depression can occur in young children, it is much more common in adolescents (youth ages 12–18 years). Depression before children reach puberty occurs equally in boys and girls. After puberty, depression is more common in girls.



Causes and Symptoms

Why does my child have depression?

We don't fully understand all the causes of depression; we think it's a combination of genetics (inherited traits) and environmental factors (events and surroundings). There is no single cause. Stressors or events that cause a stressful response and genetic factors can cause depression. Stressors can be triggers that result from pediatric illnesses and diseases, such as viral infections; diseases of the thyroid and endocrine system; head injury; epilepsy; and heart, kidney, and lung diseases. A family history of depression is a major genetic factor; a child can be more prone to becoming depressed if a parent or sibling has been diagnosed with depression. Stressors in everyday life also contribute to the development of depression, for example, the loss of a close loved one; parents frequently arguing, separating, or divorcing; school changes; and family financial problems. Finally, developmental factors, such as learning and language disabilities, are sometimes overlooked. Other mental illnesses and symptoms, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, fears, and excessive shyness, in addition to not having opportunities to develop interests and show strengths and talents, can add to depression.

What are the symptoms of depression?

- Depressed, sad, or irritable mood
- Significant loss of interest or pleasure in activities
- Significant weight loss, weight gain, or appetite changes
- Difficulty falling asleep and/or staying asleep or sleeping too much
- Restlessness, unable to sit still (referred to as psychomotor agitation), or being slowed down (referred to as psychomotor slowing)
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate feelings of guilt
- Difficulties in concentrating or making decisions
- Constant thoughts of death, suicidal thinking, or a suicide attempt
- Irritable or cranky mood
- Boredom, giving up favorite activities, toys, and interests
- Failure to gain weight as expected
- Delays in going to sleep, refusal to wake up for school or get out of bed
- Difficulty sitting still or very slowed movements
- Tired all the time, feeling "lazy"
- Self-critical or blaming self for everything
- Decline in school performance, failing grades or classes
- Frequent thoughts and discussion about death, giving away favorite belongings

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, an episode of major depression is characterized by 5 or more of these symptoms (with at least one of the symptoms noted as a depressed and/or irritable mood or having reduced interests or little pleasure) that have lasted for at least 2 weeks and affected a child's performance at school, at work, with family, or with friends. These symptoms are not caused by medication, drug abuse, or alcohol and are not the result of another medical or mental illness.

The symptoms of major depressive disorder (MDD) in youth and adults are the same. However, the symptoms of depression may look differently in children and adolescents than in adults. For example, children may have difficulty expressing their sad mood and may complain of headaches or stomachaches instead. Listed below are other ways that depression may look differently in youth:

How do the symptoms of depression differ from typical sadness?

It is normal for children and adolescents to feel sad sometimes or be irritated in response to stressors. Depression is different from occasional sadness. A child or adolescent with depression has a significant **change** in their typical mood and interest level and is persistent (ie, most of the time for several weeks). Youth with depression show symptoms that are significant enough to cause them problems at home, at school, and/or with friends and family. Youth with depression may report that their symptoms are in response to a stressful or upsetting event, or they may not know what caused them to feel this way.

Diagnosing Depression in Children and Adolescents

How is depression in children and adolescents diagnosed?

If you are concerned that your child is depressed, it's important to discuss this with your child's doctor. Your child's doctor may recommend a thorough assessment. A thorough assessment includes getting information about the degree and severity of symptoms, psychosocial stressors and functioning from the child, parent, caregiver and/or guardian who lives with the child and reports from the school.

This assessment should be done by someone with experience in evaluating children for mental illness, such as a child and adolescent psychiatrist. A child and adolescent psychiatrist is a doctor who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of disorders of thinking, feeling and/or behavior affecting children, adolescents and their

families. Child and adolescent psychiatry training requires four years of medical school, at least three years of residency training in general psychiatry with adults, and two years of additional specialized training in treating children, adolescents and families.

A medical history and physical exam, as well as a detailed history of biologically related family members, are also recommended to rule out or identify other co-existing medical and mental health conditions that may require treatment.

What other conditions can accompany depression?

Up to 50% of children and adolescents diagnosed with depression may have other mental health disorders, including bipolar disorder. Children and adolescents with depression may also have anxiety, ADHD, and learning differences or be at risk of abusing drugs or alcohol.

If you are concerned that your child is depressed, it's important to discuss this with your child's doctor.





Suicide and Youth with Depression

Youth with depression are at increased risk for suicide attempts and suicide. It is important to ask your child whether they are having thoughts about hurting themselves. If your child expresses suicidal thoughts, this is an opportunity to discuss taking precautions to make the child's environment safe. Talking with your child about suicide does not cause suicide, but it does let your child know that you are concerned and that you want to know whether they have any thoughts about it.

How common are suicidal thoughts, behaviors, and death by suicide in youth?

Among students in grades 9–12 in the United States in 2015, 18% reported seriously considering attempting suicide in the previous 12 months, whereas 15% actually made a suicide plan. Nine percent of students attempted suicide one or more times, and 3% made an attempt that resulted in an injury, poisoning, or an overdose that required medical attention.

In 2015, suicide was the third leading cause of death among youth between the ages of 10 and 14 years and the second leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 15 and 34 years. Suicide claims more lives than many

diseases in children and adolescents. More adolescents and young adults die from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza, and chronic lung disease combined.

What factors other than depression may increase suicide risk?

Additional risk factors for suicide include having a family member who died by suicide or knowing someone else who died by suicide. Other factors include family conflict, sleep problems, substance use, school problems, impulsivity, other mental illnesses, not feeling connected to others, and easy access to lethal means of self-harm.

Do antidepressant medications increase the risk of suicide?

Determining whether antidepressant medications increase the risk for suicide is quite hard, particularly because children and adolescents with depression are more likely to think about suicide and attempt it than other children. With this concern, the FDA (US Food and Drug Administration) reviewed all published and unpublished clinical trials of antidepressants in children and adolescents, and in 2004, it issued a black box warning about an increased risk

of suicidal thoughts and/or behaviors in youth who take antidepressants. There was no record of completed suicides in their review of over 2,000 youth who were treated with antidepressant medications, but the rate of suicidal thinking/behavior (including actual suicide attempts) was twice as high in youth taking medications (4%) than those taking placebo or sugar pills (2%).

Treating underlying depression in youth who are thinking about suicide is an important strategy, because antidepressant medications improve depressive symptoms, which is the best way to treat suicidal thoughts and behavior. Antidepressant medication may increase the risk for suicidal thoughts and/or behaviors in a small percentage of youth. If a doctor determines that medication is appropriate for your child, it is important to weigh the pros and cons of antidepressants. If your child has moderate to severe depression, the benefit of reducing depressive symptoms may outweigh the risks of medication side effects. Maintaining regular follow-ups and monitoring throughout treatment helps manage any uncertainty. It is important that your child be monitored closely for all side effects, including suicidal thinking and behavior, particularly in the first few weeks after beginning treatment with an antidepressant and after adjusting the antidepressant dose.



Treating Depression

The first step to treatment is a thorough assessment. Once your child has been diagnosed with depression, there are several important factors to consider before moving forward with treatment. It is important to get as much information as possible from your child's doctor on effective treatment options, potential side effects, and treatment expectations. You and your child should have the opportunity to ask questions about treatment options before you make a decision about your child's care.

It is important to share with your child's doctor your understanding of depression and related treatment options. Family values and norms—which can be heavily influenced by ethnicity and culture—may play a role in decision making regarding your child's wellness.

If your child's depression is not so severe or does not significantly impair his or her functioning and they do not have suicidal thoughts or psychosis, your child's doctor may recommend active support and monitoring. During a period of active support and monitoring, it is important for your child to have positive interactions with peers, to exercise, to follow a healthy diet, and to practice good sleep patterns. It is also important to reduce


stressors, if possible. If your child's depressive symptoms get worse or do not improve, his or her doctor may recommend that you consider specific treatment, such as psychotherapy and/or antidepressant medications for your child.

The primary goals of treatment are as follows: 1) to shorten the duration of your child's depressive episode; 2) to provide treatment until your child's symptoms are in remission (having minimal or no depressive symptoms); and 3) to prevent relapse or recurrence (a return of depressive symptoms).

Will my child's depression pass without treatment?

A single episode of depression, if left untreated, often lasts from 6 to 9 months, which can be an entire school year for most children. When left untreated, the consequences can be serious, including a high risk for substance abuse, eating disorders, teenage pregnancy, and/or suicidal thinking and behaviors. Suicide attempts and completed suicide are risks of untreated depression. Children with untreated depression are also likely to have ongoing problems in school, at home, and with their friends; it can also lead to a higher risk of developing a more chronic, difficult-to-treat form of depression.

A single episode of depression, if left untreated, often lasts from 6 to 9 months, which can be an entire school year for most children.





Taking Medication for Depression

Are medications effective for depression in youth?

Antidepressant medications can be effective in relieving depressive symptoms in children and adolescents. Approximately 55–65% of children and adolescents will respond to initial treatment with antidepressant medication. Of those who don't respond to the first treatment, a high number will respond to another medication and/or a different form of therapy, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) or dialectical behavior therapy (DBT).

What types of medications are available to treat my child's depression?

To date, fluoxetine [a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI), also known as Prozac] is the only antidepressant approved by the FDA for the treatment of depression in both children and adolescents (ages 8 years and older). Escitalopram (an SSRI also known as Lexapro) is approved by the FDA for the treatment of depression in adolescents (ages 12 years and older). No other antidepressants have been approved by the FDA for the treatment of depression in youth, although some have been approved for the treatment of other mental health conditions. Your child's doctor may prescribe other antidepressant medications that are not FDA approved based on available data. You should know that prescribing an antidepressant that has not been approved by the FDA for use in children and adolescents (referred to as off-label use or prescribing) is common and is consistent with accepted clinical practice.

Factors that might influence a doctor's choice(s) of medication include, but are not limited to, specific characteristics of the patient, comorbid or coexisting mental or medical conditions, and patient or parent/

caregiver's preference for treatment with medication, psychotherapy, or combined psychotherapy and medication treatment.

Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs)

Medications called SSRIs are the first-line treatment for youth with depression.

SSRIs work by increasing the levels of serotonin in the brain. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that sends signals between brain cells. It is common to experience side effects from SSRIs right after beginning treatment; it can take up to 4 to 6 weeks of taking an SSRI regularly for the medication levels in the brain to be steady enough to decrease the symptoms of depression. SSRIs are also used for treating conditions other than depression, such as anxiety disorders.


The table on page 10 includes the most commonly used SSRIs for youth with depression.

Other Antidepressants

Although SSRIs are usually the first choice of medication for children and adolescents with depression, your doctor may recommend different types of medications if in certain circumstances, such as your child does not improve with an SSRI. These medications have unique qualities that make them effective, some of which involve serotonin and other neurotransmitters. The table on page 10 includes non-SSRI antidepressants that are approved by the FDA for adults with depression and are often prescribed for youth with depression in clinical practice.

Other prescribed antidepressant medications, such as tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs, eg, imipramine and amitriptyline) and older monoamine oxidase inhibitors [MAOIs, eg,

Medications called SSRIs are the first-line treatment for youth with depression.



SELECTIVE SEROTONIN REUPTAKE INHIBITORS

Medication	Formulations	Daily Dose Range
Citalopram (Celexa)	Tablet: 10/20/40 mg Suspension: 10 mg/5 ml	10–40 mg
Escitalopram (Lexapro)*	Tablet: 5/10/20 mg Suspension: 1 mg/1 ml	10–20 mg (initial dose may be 2.5–5 mg)
Fluoxetine (Prozac)**	Tablet and capsule: 10/20/40/60 mg Suspension: 20 mg/5 ml	20–60 mg (initial dose may be 10 mg)
Fluvoxamine (Luvox)	Tablet: 25/50/100 mg	50–200 mg (initial dose may be 25 mg)
Paroxetine (Paxil)	Tablet: 10/20/30/40 mg Tablet CR: 12.5/25/37.5 mg Suspension: 10 mg/5 ml	10–50 mg
Sertraline (Zoloft)	Tablet: 25/50/100 mg Suspension: 20 mg/ml	50–200 mg (initial dose may be 12.5–25 mg)

Note: CR = controlled release

*FDA approved for children age 12 and up.

**FDA approved for children age 8 and up.

NON-SSRI ANTIDEPRESSANTS

Medication	Formulations	Daily Dose Range
Bupropion, Bupropion SR (Wellbutrin)	Tablet: 75/100 mg Tablet ER 12 hour: 100/150/200 mg	150–300 mg (first dose may be 37.5–75 mg)
Bupropion XL (Wellbutrin)	Tablet ER 24 hour: 150/300/450 mg	150–450 mg
Desvenlafaxine (Pristiq)	Tablet ER 24 hour: 25/50/100 mg	50–100 mg (first dose may be 25–50 mg)
Duloxetine (Cymbalta)	Tablet: 20/30/40/60 mg	40–60 mg (first dose may be 20 mg)
Levomilnacipran (Fetzima)	Capsule ER 24 hour: 20/40/80/120 mg	40–120 mg (first dose may be 20 mg)
Mirtazapine (Remeron)	Tablet: 7.5/15/30/45 mg Tablet disintegrating: 15/30/45 mg	15–45 mg (first dose may be 7.5–15 mg)
Trazodone (Desyrel)	Tablet: 50/100/150/300 mg	100–150 mg (first dose may be 25–50 mg)
Venlafaxine XR (Effexor)	Tablet: 25/37.5/50/75/100 mg Capsule and Tablet ER 24 hour: 37.5/75/150/225 mg	150–300 mg (first dose may be 37.5 mg)
Vilazodone (Viibryd)	Tablet: 10/20/40 mg	15–40 mg (first dose may be 10 mg)
Vortioxetine (Trintellix)	Tablet: 5/10/20 mg	20 mg (first dose may be 10 mg)

Note: SR = sustained release, ER = extended release, XL = extended release, XR = extended release

phenelzine (Nardil) and tranylcypromine (Parnate)], are not recommended as a first-line treatment for youth with depression because they have not been proven to be effective and have negative side effects. A newer MAOI called selegiline (Emsam) appears to be as good as other antidepressants in treating adults with depression, with few negative side effects. Although selegiline was not shown to be effective in treating adolescents with depression, it was safe and well tolerated in a recent study.

Sometimes more than one antidepressant medication may be prescribed for a youth who has shown only partial response to initial treatment, has lingering symptoms,

or has not responded to treatment. Other types or classes of medications, particularly mood stabilizers and atypical antipsychotic medications, may also improve the effects of antidepressant medications, but they are not used as often because of the risk of more serious side effects like weight gain, obesity, and metabolic syndrome.

Side Effects

The most common side effects of SSRIs are as follows:

- gastrointestinal symptoms (nausea, stomachaches, and/or diarrhea)
- headaches
- agitation
- sleep disturbance
- irritability
- activation

Sexual side effects, increased bruising and/or bleeding, and mania are also possible, although they are less common side effects of SSRIs. The most common side effects of non-SSRI antidepressants vary quite a bit among the individual medications. If your child has been prescribed a non-SSRI antidepressant, you should ask your child's doctor about the side effects that are specific to that medication.

Some side effects may be managed easily. For example, if your child experiences the side effect of sleepiness throughout the day, it may be wise to take the antidepressant at bedtime, or if your child experiences nausea as a side effect, it might be helpful to take the antidepressant with meals. If your child experiences side effects from one SSRI, they will not necessarily experience the same side effects from all SSRIs, so it is important for you and your child to discuss all of their side effects with their doctor. It is important to contact your child's doctor immediately if your child experiences any unusual change in behavior at any time after starting treatment with an antidepressant.

Serotonin syndrome is a rare but serious potential side effect of SSRIs. Serotonin



syndrome occurs when high levels of serotonin accumulate in the body, and it most often happens when a person is taking more than one medication that affects the serotonin level. Symptoms of serotonin syndrome may include fever, confusion, tremor, restlessness, sweating, and increased reflexes.

Other medications, in addition to those that affect serotonin, can interact with SSRIs and other antidepressants and cause problems. Therefore, it is very important that you tell your child's doctor about all the medications and supplements that your child takes. It is also important to discuss with your child's doctor any new supplements or over-the-counter medications or medications prescribed to your child by other doctors before taking those medications.

How can I help monitor my child during treatment?

Because some youth have adverse physical and/or emotional reactions to antidepressants, parents should pay

attention to any signs of increased anxiety, agitation, aggression, or impulsivity. Parents should also check their children for involuntary restlessness or unexplained happiness or energy accompanied by fast, driven speech, and unrealistic plans or goals. These reactions are more common at the start of treatment, but they can occur at any time during treatment. If your child shows any of these symptoms or any other concerning changes in behavior, consult your child's doctor immediately, because it may be necessary to adjust the dose, change to a different medication, or stop using the medication.

The following precautions for suicide prevention should be put into place if a child or any other family member has depression:

- Dangerous means of suicide, such as guns, should be removed from the home, and potentially dangerous medications, including over-the-counter drugs like acetaminophen (Tylenol) should be locked away.

- You should work with your child's doctor or other mental health provider to develop an emergency safety plan, which consists of a planned set of actions for you, your child, and your child's doctor to take if your child has more thoughts of suicide. This should include access to a 24-hour crisis phone number available to deal with such crises.
- If your child expresses new or more frequent thoughts of wanting to die or self-harm or takes steps to do so, you should implement the safety plan and contact your child's doctor immediately.

How do I know if my child's medication is working?

You may notice that your child's medication is working if your child's depressive symptoms (mood, interest, appetite, sleep, concentration, or suicidal thinking/behavior) improve or if they are functioning better at school, at home, or with peers. Your child's doctor will know whether your child's medication is working by collecting information from

you, your child's school team, and your child through clinical assessments and self-reports and parent questionnaires and other reports.

It is important for your child to have more frequent visits with their doctor soon after they start their treatment with an antidepressant. More frequent visits early in treatment and during times of antidepressant medication dose adjustments will allow your child's treatment provider to address any concerns about treatment response or side effects and to monitor your child for suicidal thinking and behavior.

What can be done if my child's depression is not improving on medication?

Depending on the specific antidepressant that your child is taking, it may take 4–6 weeks of treatment before your child's depressive symptoms begin to show improvement. This may be the case, even if your child started to have side effects shortly after taking an antidepressant for the first time. If your child's depressive symptoms have not improved after taking an antidepressant regularly for 4–6 weeks, their doctor may consider increasing the antidepressant dose. An appropriate trial of an antidepressant may last up to 12 weeks. If your child's depressive symptoms have not responded to an adequate trial of an antidepressant or if your child experiences unacceptable side effects from an antidepressant, their doctor may recommend switching to a different antidepressant or adding an additional antidepressant.

When a child or adolescent fails to respond to treatment with an SSRI, it is extremely important to understand

why and address the cause. In addition to problems with finding the right dose or the duration of medication therapy, nonresponse may be the result of a number of other factors, including wrong diagnosis, another medical illness, extreme stress, poor management of comorbid mental conditions, or not properly following the instructions on taking the medication. If your child does not respond to a first SSRI, your child's doctor might recommend a second SSRI. Research has shown that approximately half of youth who don't respond to one SSRI will still respond to a second SSRI. If your child does not respond to a second SSRI, non-SSRI antidepressants are then considered.

Once my child is well, how long do they need to continue taking medication?

If your child responds to treatment with an antidepressant, which is when depressive symptoms are reduced by 50% or more, it is recommended that they continue taking antidepressants for 6–12 months after achieving this response. Youth who don't continue treatment, especially if they still have leftover symptoms, are at increased risk of sinking back into depression.

Six to 12 months after responding to treatment, stopping antidepressants medication may be the right choice for some youth. Stopping antidepressant treatment should be done only under the care and monitoring of your child's doctor. Youth who stop taking antidepressants should be reassessed by their doctor within 1–2 weeks to check for any withdrawal effects and/or return of depressive symptoms.



Psychosocial Treatments for Depression

What treatments other than medication are available to help my child's depression?

There is a great deal of scientific support showing the effectiveness of psychosocial treatments for youth with depression. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), interpersonal therapy (IPT), and attachment-based family therapy are several examples.

Cognitive-behavioral Therapy

CBT is the most widely studied psychotherapy for the treatment of youth with depression. CBT is a form of psychotherapy that targets thoughts and behaviors that are related to mood. The individual is taught to identify patterns of thinking and behavior that add to their depressed mood. CBT may be used as a form of treatment by itself, or it can be combined with antidepressant medication. There is some evidence that CBT is most effective when combined with antidepressant therapy, particularly for adolescents with more severe depression or in those with treatment-resistant depression. Pediatric guidelines say that CBT alone may be an appropriate first-line treatment for those with mild depression.

Interpersonal Psychotherapy

Although there are fewer clinical trials of IPT compared with CBT, IPT is a well-established intervention in adolescents. IPT works by focusing on improving relationships with friends and family, increasing social support, and improving problem-solving skills.

Family-based Treatment

Studies involving family therapy are more difficult to evaluate because of the diversity of interventions. However, one treatment model—attachment-based family therapy—has been manualized, meaning that therapists follow the same process, and it has been

shown to be effective in studies. This intervention, which promotes family alliances and connection, builds on family strengths and also improves the adolescent's success outside of the home.

Dialectical Behavior Therapy

DBT, originally developed in adults, has recently been adapted for adolescents. It has been proven to be effective in treating moderate to severe depression and co-occurring disorders, along with self-harm and suicidal behaviors. It was originally based on CBT but it also includes strategies for controlling emotions and handling stressful situations.

Supplementary Interventions

Other work has focused on using high-dose exercise programs to reduce depressive symptoms, improve mood, and reduce relapse into depression. Studies have shown that exercise can be an effective way to treat depression. Furthermore, interventions that improve sleep can also be used to improve depressive symptoms. Motivational interviewing strategies can be used to improve adolescents' participation with all interventions and improve their desire to stick with the treatment program.

Although there is little research to support its use to treat depression in children and adolescents, psychodynamic psychotherapy may be a helpful part of an individualized treatment plan for some youth.

Promoting wellness and emotional resilience, not just reducing depressive symptoms, is an overall goal of positive mental health. Strategies focus on youth participating in activities that develop self-confidence or a sense of purpose, increase feeling connected with other people, and foster gratitude or willingness to help others.

Promoting wellness and emotional resilience, not just reducing depressive symptoms, is an overall goal of positive mental health.



Other and/or Unproven Treatments for Depression

Several herbal supplements on the market (eg, St John's Wort, etc.) may claim to treat symptoms of depression; however, it is important to understand that there is little scientific research showing that these supplements work in treating depression. In addition, these supplements are not regulated by the FDA or any other agency. If you are considering giving your child herbal supplements, always check with the doctor as supplements may interact with prescribed medications.

There are treatments for MDD in youth that are currently being studied under the oversight of the FDA, including esketamine and transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS). These treatments may or may not be available in your area. Youth who do not improve clinically during other stages of treatment may be candidates for such interventions. Before starting new or investigational treatment, your child's doctor may consider conducting a reassessment to determine whether the initial diagnosis was correct, evaluate whether there are ongoing or unrecognized comorbid disorders, and assess how well psychosocial interventions are being implemented.

Several herbal supplements on the market (eg, St John's Wort, etc.) may claim to treat symptoms of depression; however, it is important to understand that there is little scientific research showing that these supplements work in treating depression.



Helping the Depressed Child

What is my role in my child's treatment?

Provide Support and Reduce Stress

It is important to remember that depression is an illness, and you will need to provide support, avoid blame, and reduce as much stress as possible for your child. It will be necessary to work with your child to review their current schedule and/or activities to determine what might need to be adjusted. It may be necessary to modify your expectations for your child, at least until symptoms improve. When disciplining or punishing your child, don't deny them access to things that make them happy or help them cope (eg, don't take away access to friends or extracurricular activities, if possible). As needed, work with and involve school professionals to adjust academic workloads, pace, and expectations. Communicate to the teachers and other school staff that your child suffers from mental health challenges and that from time to time they may require special accommodations for learning and/or interaction with peers. Assumptions about what your child can manage in school, based only on periods of good moods (also known as euthymia), should be strongly avoided.

Help Teenagers Practice New Skills and New Ways of Thinking

It is important to be involved in your child's treatment. This includes knowing the new skills/strategies that your child is learning in treatment. Parents can help to model these skills at home and point out opportunities to practice and apply them in the home setting. Some therapists envision the parents' role as serving as a "coach" to help with learning these strategies and extending them to other settings.

Reduce Negative Emotion in the Home (Sarcasm, Criticism)

Having family members in the home who suffer from depression can be challenging. It is important to avoid criticism and blame. While your child is depressed you may consider calling a truce on "hot topics" or subjects that can lead to high conflict and disagreement. Finding activities that the family can do together to promote positive emotions and increase activity level can be helpful. Parents may seek out parent psychoeducation or couples therapy, and you may check to see whether parent coaching is available in the community. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA), and other mental health organizations offer a variety of options for support and information. Because childhood or adolescent depression affects the whole household, all family members can benefit from supportive treatment.

Develop Communication Strategies

When there is conflict and when emotions are high, developing a solid communication plan is recommended. An "exit and wait" strategy to allow family members to gain control of their emotions can help to manage difficult communication and conflict.

Participate in Safety Plan; Keep Environment Safe

A safety plan that includes strategies for managing mood, getting support, and knowing when to get professional help is important. In addition, making the environment safe by removing all access to dangerous tools, such as medications, knives or other blades, weapons, and firearms, is an essential part of treating youth with depression.

Monitoring Social Media, Peer Influence, Social Stress

Youth who are depressed can be especially vulnerable to social media and conflict with peers. Teenagers may see others as having more friends or more fun than themselves, which may make them feel even more excluded or not liked by others. Constantly checking social media sites to make sure that they haven't been left out can be a source of stress for youth. Parents need to be vigilant and aware of the impact of social media and peers on their child. Protective monitoring, such as having guidelines and rules for using technology, is important. Technological tools, such as parental control software, to control and monitor use of media are more and more available and may be needed for youth who are negatively affected by social media and/or cyberaggression or cyberbullying by their peers.

Is there anything else that I can do to help my child?

It's important for parents and caregivers to practice self-care. Find support and learn more about what's going on with your child so that you can be as effective as possible in helping them get the care they need. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA), and other mental health organizations offer a variety of options for support and information. Depression tends to run in families, so it's important to know that if anyone else in the family is experiencing symptoms of depression, they need to also seek treatment.

Resources

- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) https://www.aacap.org/aacap/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Centers/Depression_Resource_Center/Home.aspx
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) <https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/Family-Members-and-Caregivers>
- Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA) <http://www.dbsalliance.org/site/PageServer?pagename=home>
- National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/teen-depression/index.shtml>
<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression-what-you-need-to-know/index.shtml>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/depression.html>

Author Disclosures

MEREDITH CHAPMAN, MD

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MINA K. DULCAN, MD

Advisor/Consultant: Care Management Technologies

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GRAHAM J. EMSLIE, MD

Professor, Chief of the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center

Chief of Service, Children's Medical Center

Advisor/Consultant: Assurex Health, Inc.; Syneos Health; Lundbeck; Otsuka America Pharmaceutical, Inc.

Research Funding: Duke University, Forest Research Institute, Inc.

CATHRYN A. GALANTER, MD

Training Director, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, SUNY Downstate/Kings County Hospital

Advisor/Consultant: The REACH Institute

Books/Intellectual Property: American Psychiatric Association Publishing

JESSICA M. JONES, MA, LPA

No disclosures to report

BETH KENNARD, PSYD

Program Director, Clinical Psychology Graduate Program, University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center

School of Health Professions Promotion and Tenure Committee, University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center

Vice Protocol Chair, CBT Expert—IMPAACT

Board of Directors, Jerry M. Lewis, MD, Research Foundation

Royalties: Guilford Press

THEODORE A. PETTI, MD, MPH

President, American Society for Adolescent Psychiatry

ADELAIDE S. ROBB, MD

Advisor/Consultant: Allergan, Inc.; Bracket Global; Ironshore Pharmaceuticals Inc.; Lundbeck; Aevi Genomic Medicine, Inc.; Neuronetics; National Institute of Mental Health; Rhodes Pharmaceuticals; Sunovion Pharmaceuticals, Inc.; Tris Pharma; University of Cambridge

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TIMOTHY E. WILENS, MD

Chief, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Department

Co-director, Center for Addiction Medicine Massachusetts General Hospital

Advisor/Consultant: Euthymics Bioscience; Neurovance; Otsuka America Pharmaceutical, Inc.; National Institute on Drug Abuse; Ironshore Pharmaceuticals Inc.; Alcobra Ltd.; US National Football League (ERM Associates); US Minor/Major League Baseball; Bay Cove Human Services; Phoenix House and Gavin Foundation

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Medication Tracking Form

Use this form to track your child's medication history. Bring this form to appointments with your provider and update changes in medications, doses, side effects and results.

Date	Medication	Dose	Side Effects	Reason for keeping/stopping



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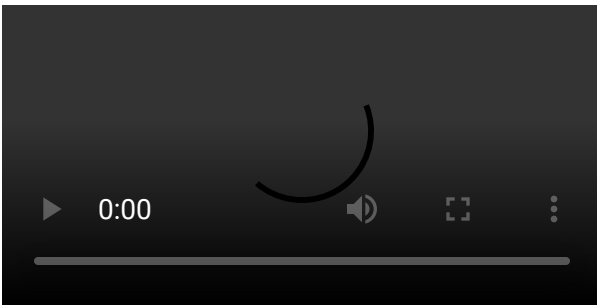
Does Social Media Use Cause Depression?

childmind.org/article/is-social-media-use-causing-depression

How heavy Instagram and Facebook use may be affecting kids negatively

Writer: [Caroline Miller](#)

Clinical Experts: [Jerry Bubrick, PhD](#) , [Alexandra Hamlet, PsyD](#)



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10 min



Is using social media making our kids unhappy? Evidence is mounting that there is a link between social media and depression. In several studies, teenage and young adult users who spend the most time on Instagram, Facebook and other platforms were shown to have a substantially (from 13 to 66 percent) higher rate of reported depression than those who spent the least time.

Does that mean that Instagram and TikTok are actually *causing* depression? These studies show a correlation, not causation. But it's worth a serious look at how social media could be affecting teenagers and young adults negatively.

One reason the correlation seems more than coincidental is that an increase in depression occurred in tandem with the rise in smartphone use.

A 2017 study of over half a million eighth through 12th graders found that the number exhibiting high levels of depressive symptoms increased by 33 percent between 2010 and 2015. In the same period, the suicide rate for girls in that age group increased by 65 percent.

Smartphones were introduced in 2007, and by 2015 fully 92 percent of teens and young adults owned a smartphone. The rise in depressive symptoms correlates with smartphone adoption during that period, even when matched year by year, observes the study's lead author, San Diego State University psychologist Jean Twenge, PhD.

Over that same time period there was a sharp spike in reports of students seeking help at college and university counseling centers, principally for depression and anxiety. Visits jumped 30 percent between 2010 and 2015, and they've continued to rise since the pandemic.

Social media and depression

One of the biggest differences in the lives of current teenagers and young adults, compared to earlier generations, is that they spend much less time connecting with their peers in person and more time connecting electronically, principally through social media.

Some experts see the rise in depression as evidence that the connections social media users form electronically are less emotionally satisfying, leaving them feeling socially isolated.

"The less you are connected with human beings in a deep, empathic way, the less you're really getting the benefits of a social interaction," points out Alexandra Hamlet, PsyD, a clinical psychologist. "The more superficial it is, the less likely it's going to cause you to feel connected, which is something we all need."

Indeed, one exception to the depression correlation is girls who are high users of social media but also keep up a high level of face-to-face social interaction. The Twenge study showed that those girls who interact intensely offline as well as through social media don't show the increase in depressive symptoms that those who interact less in person do.

And there are some teenagers who aren't successful in connecting with peers offline, because they are isolated geographically or don't feel accepted in their schools and local communities. For those kids, electronic connection can be lifesaving.

Social media and perceived isolation

Another study of a national sample of young adults (age 19-32) showed correlation between the time spent on social media and perceived social isolation (PSI). The authors noted that directionality can't be determined. That is, "Do people feeling socially isolated spend more time on social media, or do more intense users develop PSI?"

If it's the latter, they noted, "Is it because the individual is spending less time on more authentic social experiences that would decrease PSI? Or is it the nature of observing highly curated social feeds that they make you feel more excluded?"

Which brings us what we now call FOMO, or fear of missing out.

Jerry Bubrick, PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, observes that "FOMO is really the fear of not being connected to our social world, and that need to feel connected sometimes trumps whatever's going on in the actual situation we're in. The more we use social media, the less we think about being present in the moment."

Instead we might be occupied with worrying why we weren't invited to a party we're seeing on Instagram, or making sure we don't miss a single post from a friend. But if we're always playing catch-up to endless online updates, we're prioritizing social interactions that aren't as emotionally rewarding and can actually make us feel more isolated.

Social media and self-esteem

Another theory about the increase in depression is the loss of self-esteem, especially in teenage girls, when they compare themselves negatively with artfully curated images of those who appear to be prettier, thinner, more popular and richer.

"Many girls are bombarded with their friends posting the most perfect pictures of themselves, or they're following celebrities and influencers who do a lot of Photoshopping and have makeup and hair teams," explains Dr. Hamlet. "If that's their model for what is normal, it can be very hard on their self-confidence."

Indeed, image-driven Instagram shows up in surveys as the platform that most leads young people to report feeling anxiety, depression and worries about body image.

Curation of a perfect image may not only make others feel inadequate, it's unhealthy even for those who appear to be successful at it, notes Dr. Bubrick. "Kids spend so much time on social media trying to post what they think the world will think is a perfect life. Look at how happy I am! Look how beautiful I am! Without that they're worried that their friends won't accept them. They're afraid of being rejected." And if they are getting positive feedback from their social media accounts, they might worry that what their friends like isn't the "real" them.

Less healthy activity

Another possible source of depression may be what teenagers are *not* doing during while they're spending time on social media, including physical activity and things that generate a sense of accomplishment, like learning new skills and developing talents.

“If you’re spending a lot of time on your phone, you have less time for activities that can build confidence, a sense of achievement and connectedness,” explains Dr. Hamlet.

Kids who are spending a lot of time on devices are not getting much in return to make them feel good about themselves, she adds. “Yes, you get a little dopamine burst whenever you get a notification, or a like on a picture, or a follow request. But those things are addicting without being satisfying.”

Disrupted concentration

Another thing disrupted by social media is the process of doing homework and other tasks that require concentration. It’s become common for teenagers to engage with friends on social media at the same time they are studying. They take pride in being able to multi-task, but evidence shows that it cuts down on learning and performance.

“Basically, multitasking isn’t possible,” Dr. Hamlet notes. “What you end up doing is really just switching back and forth between two tasks rather quickly. There is a cost to the brain.” And with poorer concentration and constant interruption, homework takes substantially longer than it should, cutting into free time and adding to stress.

Sleep deprivation and depression

Some of the ways in which social media use impacts mood may be indirect. For instance, one of the most common contributors to depression in teenagers is sleep deprivation, which can be caused, or exacerbated, by social media.

Research shows that 60 percent of adolescents are looking at their phones in the last hour before sleep, and that they get on average an hour less sleep than their peers who don’t use their phones before bed. Blue light from electronic screens interferes with falling asleep; on top of that, checking social media is not necessarily a relaxing or sleep-inducing activity. Scrolling on social media, notes Dr. Hamlet, can easily end up causing stress.

“Social media can have a profound effect on sleep,” adds Dr. Bubrick. “You have the intention to check Instagram or watch TikTok videos for 5 minutes, and the next thing you know 50 minutes are gone. You’re an hour behind in sleep, and more tired the next day. You find it harder to focus. You’re off your game, and it spirals from there.”

How to minimize negative effects of social media use

While we don’t yet have conclusive evidence that social media use actually *causes* depression, we do have plenty of warning signs that it may be affecting our kids negatively. So it’s smart for parents to check in regularly with kids about their social

media use, to make sure it's positive and healthy, and guide them towards ways to change it, if you think it's not.

Also, be alert for symptoms of depression. If you notice signs that your child might be depressed, take them seriously. Ask your child how they are doing, and don't hesitate to set up an appointment with a mental health provider.

Steps you can take to ensure healthy social media use:

- **Focus on balance:** Make sure your kids are also engaging in social interaction offline, and have time for activities that help build identity and self-confidence.
- **Turn off notifications:** App developers are getting more and more aggressive with notifications to lure users to interrupt whatever they're doing to engage constantly with their phones. Don't let them.
- **Look out for girls at higher risk of depression:** Monitor girls who are going through a particularly tough time or are under unusual stress. Negative effects of social media can have more impact when confidence is down.
- **Teach mindful use of social media:** Encourage teenagers to be honest with themselves about how time spent on social media makes them feel, and disengage from interactions that increase stress or unhappiness.
- **Model restraint and balance in your own media diet:** Set an example by disengaging from media to spend quality family time together, including phone-free dinners and other activities. Kids may resist, but they'll feel the benefits.
- **Phone-free time before sleep:** Enforce a policy of no smartphones in the bedroom after a specific time and overnight. Use an old-fashioned alarm clock to wake up.

Frequently Asked Questions

How does social media cause anxiety and depression?

Social media has been shown to be correlated with anxiety and depression. This correlation could have to do with teens connecting more online rather than in person, leaving them feeling socially isolated. Teens are also looking at carefully curated images online, which may cause anxiety, low self-esteem, and body image issues.

This article was last reviewed or updated on October 30, 2023.

DEPRESSION

Helping Someone with Depression

Your support and encouragement can play an important role in your loved one's recovery. Here's how to make a difference.

By [Melinda Smith, M.A.](#), [Lawrence Robinson](#) and [Jeanne Segal, Ph.D.](#)

Last updated or reviewed on February 5, 2024

How can I help someone with depression?

Depression is a serious but treatable disorder that affects millions of people, from young to old and from all walks of life. It gets in the way of everyday life, causing tremendous pain, hurting not just those suffering from it but also impacting everyone around them.

If someone you love is depressed, you may be experiencing any number of difficult emotions, including helplessness, frustration, anger, fear, guilt, and sadness. These feelings are all normal. It's not easy dealing with a friend or family member's depression. And if you neglect your own health, it can become overwhelming.

That said, your companionship and support can be crucial to your loved one's recovery. You can help them to cope with depression symptoms, overcome negative thoughts, and regain their energy, optimism, and enjoyment of life. Start by learning all you can about depression and how to best talk about it with your friend or family member. But as you reach out, don't forget to look after your own emotional health—you'll need it to provide the full support your loved one needs.

Understanding depression in a friend or family member

Depression is a serious condition. Don't underestimate the seriousness of depression. Depression drains a person's energy, optimism, and motivation. Your depressed loved one can't just "snap out of it" by sheer force of will.

The symptoms of depression aren't personal. Depression makes it difficult for a person to connect on a deep emotional level with anyone, even the people they love the most. It's also common for depressed people to say hurtful things and lash out in anger. Remember that this is the depression talking, not your loved one, so try not to take it personally.

Hiding the problem won't make it go away. It doesn't help anyone involved if you try making excuses, covering up the problem, or lying for a friend or family member who is depressed. In fact, this may keep the depressed

person from seeking treatment.

Your loved one isn't lazy or unmotivated. When you're suffering from depression, just thinking about doing the things that may help you to feel better can seem exhausting or impossible to put into action. Have patience as you encourage your loved one to take the first small steps to recovery.

You can't "fix" someone else's depression. As much as you may want to, you can't rescue someone from depression nor fix the problem for them. You're not to blame for your loved one's depression or responsible for their happiness (or lack thereof). While you can offer love and support, ultimately recovery is in the hands of the depressed person.

Recognizing depression symptoms in a loved one

Family and friends are often the first line of defense in the fight against depression. That's why it's important to understand the [signs and symptoms of depression](#). You may notice the problem in a depressed loved one before they do, and your influence and concern can motivate them to seek help.

Be concerned if your loved one:

Doesn't seem to care about anything anymore. Has lost interest in work, sex, hobbies, and other pleasurable activities. Has withdrawn from friends, family, and other social activities.

Expresses a bleak or negative outlook on life. Is uncharacteristically sad, irritable, short-tempered, critical, or moody; talks about feeling "helpless" or "hopeless."

Frequently complains of aches and pains such as headaches, stomach problems, and back pain. Or complains of feeling tired and drained all the time.

Sleeps less than usual or oversleeps. Has become indecisive, forgetful, disorganized, and "out of it."

Eats more or less than usual, and has recently gained or lost weight.

Drinks more or abuses drugs, including prescription sleeping pills and painkillers, as a way to [self-medicate](#) how they're feeling.

How to talk to someone about depression

Sometimes it is hard to know what to say when speaking to someone about depression. You might fear that if you bring up your worries the person will get angry, feel insulted, or ignore your concerns. You may be unsure what questions to ask or how to be supportive.

If you don't know where to start, the following suggestions may help. **But remember that being a compassionate listener is much more important than giving advice.** You don't have to try to "fix" your friend or family member; you just have to be a good listener. Often, the simple act of talking face to face can be an enormous help to someone suffering from depression. Encourage the depressed person to talk about their feelings, and be willing

to listen without judgment.

Don't expect a single conversation to be the end of it. Depressed people tend to withdraw from others and isolate themselves. You may need to express your concern and willingness to listen over and over again. Be gentle, yet persistent.

Starting the conversation

Finding a way to start a conversation about depression with your loved one is always the hardest part. You could try saying:

- "I have been feeling concerned about you lately."
- "Recently, I have noticed some differences in you and wondered how you are doing."
- "I wanted to check in with you because you have seemed pretty down lately."

Once you're talking, you can ask questions such as:

- "When did you begin feeling like this?"
- "Did something happen that made you start feeling this way?"
- "How can I best support you right now?"
- "Have you thought about getting help?"

Remember, being supportive involves offering encouragement and hope. Very often, this is a matter of talking to the person in language that they will understand and can respond to while in a depressed state of mind.

What you CAN say that helps:

- "You're not alone. I'm here for you during this tough time."
- "It may be hard to believe right now, but the way you're feeling will change."
- "Please tell me what I can do now to help you."
- "Even if I'm not able to understand exactly how you feel, I care about you and want to help."
- "You're important to me. Your life is important to me."
- "When you want to give up, tell yourself you will hold on for just one more day, hour, or minute—whatever you can manage."

What you should AVOID saying:

- "This is all in your head"

- “Everyone goes through tough times.”
- “Try to look on the bright side.”
- “Why do you want to die when you have so much to live for?”
- “I can’t do anything about your situation.”
- “Just snap out of it.”
- “You should be feeling better by now.”

The risk of suicide is real

It may be hard to believe that the person you know and love would ever consider something as drastic as suicide, but a depressed person may not see any other way out. Depression clouds judgment and distorts thinking, causing a normally rational person to believe that death is the only way to end the pain they’re feeling.

Since suicide is a very real danger when someone is depressed, it’s important to know the warning signs:

- Talking about suicide, dying, or harming oneself; a preoccupation with death
- Expressing feelings of hopelessness or self-hate
- Acting in dangerous or self-destructive ways
- Getting affairs in order and saying goodbye
- Seeking out pills, weapons, or other lethal objects
- A sudden sense of calm after depression

If you think a friend or family member might be considering suicide, don’t wait, talk to them about your concerns. Many people feel uncomfortable bringing up the topic but it is one of the best things you can do [for someone who is thinking about suicide](#). Talking openly about suicidal thoughts and feelings can save a person’s life, so speak up if you’re concerned and seek professional help immediately!

What to do in a crisis situation

If you believe your loved one is at an immediate risk for suicide, do NOT leave them alone.

In the U.S., dial 911 or call the [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) at 988.

In other countries, call your country’s emergency services number or visit [IASP](#) to find a suicide prevention helpline.

Encouraging the person to get help

While you can't control someone else's recovery from depression, you can start by encouraging the depressed person to seek help. Getting a [depressed person into treatment](#) can be difficult. Depression saps energy and motivation, so even the act of [making an appointment](#) or finding a doctor can seem daunting to your loved one. Depression also involves negative ways of thinking. The depressed person may believe that the situation is hopeless and treatment pointless.

Because of these obstacles, getting your loved one to admit to the problem—and helping them see that it can be solved—is an essential step in depression recovery.

If your friend or family member resists getting help:

Suggest a general check-up with a physician. Your loved one may be less anxious about seeing a family doctor than a mental health professional. A regular doctor's visit is actually a great option, since the doctor can rule out medical causes of depression. If the doctor diagnoses depression, they can refer your loved one to a psychiatrist or psychologist. Sometimes, this "professional" opinion makes all the difference.

Offer to help the depressed person find a doctor or therapist and go with them on the first visit. [Finding the right treatment provider](#) can be difficult, and is often a trial-and-error process. For a depressed person already low on energy, it is a huge help to have assistance making calls and looking into the options.

Encourage your loved one to make a thorough list of symptoms and ailments to discuss with the doctor. You can even bring up things that you have noticed as an outside observer, such as, "You seem to feel much worse in the mornings," or "You always get stomach pains before work."

Supporting your loved one's treatment

One of the most important things you can do to help a friend or relative with depression is to give your unconditional love and support throughout the treatment process. This involves being compassionate and patient, which is not always easy when dealing with the negativity, hostility, and moodiness that go hand in hand with depression.

Provide whatever assistance the person needs (and is willing to accept). Help your loved one make and keep appointments, research treatment options, and stay on schedule with any treatment prescribed.

Have realistic expectations. It can be frustrating to watch a depressed friend or family member struggle, especially if progress is slow or stalled. Having patience is important. Even with optimal treatment, recovery from depression doesn't happen overnight.

Lead by example. Encourage the person to lead a healthier, [mood-boosting lifestyle](#) by doing it yourself: maintain a positive outlook, eat better, avoid alcohol and drugs, exercise, and lean on others for support.

Encourage activity. Invite your loved one to join you in uplifting activities, like going to a funny movie or having dinner at a favorite restaurant. [Exercise is especially helpful](#), so try to get your depressed loved one moving. Going on walks together is one of the easiest options. Be gently and lovingly persistent—don't get discouraged

or stop asking.

Pitch in when possible. Seemingly small tasks can be very hard for someone with depression to manage. Offer to help out with household responsibilities or chores, but only do what you can without getting [burned out](#) yourself!

Taking care of yourself

There's a natural impulse to want to fix the problems of people we care about, but you can't control someone else's depression. You can, however, control how well you take care of yourself. It's just as important for you to stay healthy as it is for the depressed person to get treatment, so make your own well-being a priority.

Remember the advice of airline flight attendants: put on your own oxygen mask before you assist anyone else. In other words, make sure your own health and happiness are solid before you try to help someone who is depressed. You won't do your friend or family member any good if you collapse under the pressure of trying to help. When your own needs are taken care of, you'll have the energy you need to lend a helping hand.

Speak up for yourself. You may be hesitant to speak out when the depressed person in your life upsets you or lets you down. However, [honest communication](#) will actually help the relationship in the long run. If you're suffering in silence and letting resentment build, your loved one will pick up on these negative emotions and feel even worse. Gently talk about how you're feeling before pent-up emotions make it too hard to communicate with sensitivity.

Set boundaries. Of course you want to help, but you can only do so much. Your own health will suffer if you let your life be controlled by your loved one's depression. You can't be a [caretaker round the clock](#) without paying a psychological price. To avoid burnout and resentment, set clear limits on what you are willing and able to do. You are not your loved one's therapist, so don't take on that responsibility.

Stay on track with your own life. While some changes in your daily routine may be unavoidable while caring for your friend or relative, do your best to keep appointments and plans with friends. If your depressed loved one is unable to go on an outing or trip you had planned, ask a friend to join you instead.

Seek support. You are NOT betraying your depressed relative or friend by turning to others for support. Joining a support group, talking to a counselor or clergyman, or confiding in a trusted friend will help you get through this tough time. You don't need to go into detail about your loved one's depression or betray confidences; instead focus on your emotions and what you are feeling. Make sure you can be totally honest with the person you turn to—choose someone who will listen without interruption and without judging you.

Depression support, suicide prevention help

Depression support

In the U.S.	Find DBSA Chapters/Support Groups or call the NAMI Helpline for support and referrals at 1-800-950-6264
UK	Find Depression support groups in-person and online or call the Mind Infoline at 0300 123 3393
Australia	Call the SANE Help Centre at 1800 18 7263
Canada	Call Mood Disorders Society of Canada at 519-824-5565
India	Call the Vandrevalla Foundation Helpline (India) at 1860 2662 345 or 1800 2333 330

Suicide prevention help

In the U.S.	Call 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988
UK and Ireland	Call Samaritans UK at 116 123
Australia	Call Lifeline Australia at 13 11 14
Other countries	Visit IASP or Suicide.org to find a helpline near you

More Information

Helpful links

01. [Helping Someone Receive Treatment](#) - What to do (and not to do) when trying to help a loved one get help for depression. (Families for Depression Awareness)
02. [For Friends and Family](#) - Tips for helping your loved one while also taking care of yourself. (Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance)

03. [What is the role of the family caregiver?](#) - Tips on how families can work together to manage depression treatment. (Families for Depression Awareness)
04. [How to Help Someone in Crisis](#) - Advice on how to deal with a depression crisis, including situations where hospitalization is necessary. (Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance)

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ADDICTION

How to Stop Self-Medicating Depression, Anxiety, and Stress

Drinking or using drugs to change your mood, face your fears, or deal with painful emotions? There are healthier ways than self-medication to cope with problems and improve how you feel.

By [Lawrence Robinson](#) and [Melinda Smith, M.A.](#)

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What is self-medicating?

In these times of great anxiety and distress, many of us are turning to substances to try to change the way that we feel. You might use food to give your mood a boost or alleviate boredom. You might smoke a joint to help you relax, or have a drink or two before going out to settle your nerves and ease any social anxiety. Or perhaps you turn to Xanax or Valium to help you sleep, ADHD medications to keep you focused during the day, or prescription painkillers to numb any grief or stress you're experiencing at the moment?

When you use alcohol or drugs in this way to manage symptoms of a mental health issue, it's known as "self-medicating". You may be aware that you have a mental health problem but don't know any healthier ways to cope. Or your condition could be undiagnosed and you simply use alcohol or drugs to cope with a specific symptom or situation. During the pandemic and resultant economic difficulties, for example, many of us started self-medicating stress, worry, and depression as our lives changed so much.

While self-medicating may offer some relief in the short-term, over time it only exacerbates your problems. Whether you turn to alcohol, illegal drugs, or prescription medications (or even food or cigarettes), regular self-medication can lead to addiction, a worsening of mood disorders, and increased health problems. It can also damage your relationships at home, work, and school.

But you're not powerless. By better understanding the reasons why and when you self-medicate, you can find healthier and more effective ways of coping with your problems and improving your overall mood and well-being.

Why people self-medicate

We all feel down, worried, and out of balance from time to time in response to life's struggles and setbacks. But when feelings of hopelessness, fear, anger, sadness, or overwhelming stress start to interfere with how you function in daily life, it can be a sign that you need help for an underlying condition. Instead of seeking treatment, though, it can be tempting to try to cope on your own in the simplest way possible: by reaching for a drink or popping a pill.

In these times of widespread financial and social turmoil, many of us have tried to self-medicate our angst and uncertainty as the world seems to lurch from one crisis to another.

[\[Read: Dealing with Uncertainty\]](#)

Other people turn to substances to cope with unpleasant memories or feelings stemming from the past, such as [unresolved traumatic incidents](#). Others use alcohol or drugs to face situations that frighten them or to stay focused on tasks throughout the day.

Just as the reasons for seeking comfort in drugs or alcohol vary according to the individual, so too can the methods of self-medicating.

Forms of self-medication

Alcohol tends to be the most common method of self-medication—as well as the [most commonly abused substance](#)—since it's so widely available. It may be used to self-medicate stress as well as depression and anxiety, even though beer, wine, and liquor are all depressants and will therefore only make symptoms worse.

Prescription drugs, including [opioid pain killers](#), ADHD medication, and anti-anxiety medication are also widely available. Their uses can range from numbing pain or relaxation to increasing focus and energy.

Recreational drugs, such as marijuana, cannabis, or stimulants like cocaine and amphetamines are used to manage uncomfortable emotions, situations, and memories. Their use can lead to [drug abuse and addiction](#).

Food can be used by emotional eaters to self-medicate unpleasant feelings and deal with stress, anxiety, or depression. Since most people crave foods high in sugar, calories, and unhealthy fat, [emotional eating](#) can play havoc with your waistline as well as your mood.

Nicotine contained in cigarettes and other tobacco products helps some people focus, although in the long-run tends to make symptoms of ADHD worse and can make it harder to [quit smoking](#).

Signs that you're self-medicating

It's not always easy to identify when you're self-medicating. After all, drinking alcohol is a socially acceptable part of many cultures, prescription medications can be found in most bathroom cabinets, and even recreational drugs such as marijuana are now legal or easy to obtain in a lot of places.

To understand if you're self-medicating, it's necessary to examine your motives for drinking or taking drugs—as well as the impact it's having on your life. For example, are you popping a pain pill because your back is hurting

or because you've had a stressful day at work and you want to change how you feel? Are you having a drink to be sociable with friends or complement a meal—or are you trying to improve your mood or feel less anxious?

Signs that you may be self-medicating include:

- 01. You turn to alcohol or drugs when you're feeling anxious, stressed, or depressed.** Many of us have used substances to cope with occasional bad news, such as the loss of a job or the breakup of a relationship. But if you're regularly drinking or using drugs to cope with stress, relieve boredom, improve how you feel, or to [steel yourself for a social engagement](#), for example, then there's a strong possibility you're self-medicating.
- 02. Drugs and alcohol make you feel even worse.** Drugs and alcohol tend to be temporary fixes. Once the numbing effects have worn off, you'll likely feel even worse. Self-medicating can impact how well you sleep, deplete your energy levels, and lower your immune system, making you more susceptible to illnesses. Your mood and emotional well-being will also suffer as you get trapped in a downward spiral of worsening mood and increased substance use.
- 03. It takes more and more self-medicating to gain relief.** Where once it took just one or two drinks to [ease your anxiety](#) or de-stress at the end of the day, now it takes three, four, or even more. Having an increased tolerance means that you need more alcohol or drugs to experience the same effects. As you continue to self-medicate, your tolerance will continue to increase—as will the problems caused by your increasing substance use. You can only break the cycle by finding healthier ways to deal with your problems.
- 04. Your problems are multiplying.** You started drinking to cope with stress, for example, but now you've got health, relationship, and financial problems to cope with as well. And the stress is even worse. The more you self-medicate, the more problems it creates in your life.
- 05. You worry when you don't have access to drugs or alcohol.** Do you worry how you'll cope with a social situation where alcohol won't be available? Do you start to get anxious when your prescription runs out? Do you get restless waiting for payday so you can afford to restock the drinks cabinet or call your dealer? The more uncomfortable you get at the thought of being separated from your substance of choice, the more likely it is that you're self-medicating.
- 06. Your friends and family are worried about your substance use.** Have people who care about you expressed their concern that you seem to be drinking more than usual? Or perhaps they've noted the changes in your personality, behavior, or social life? Substance abuse can [affect those around you](#) just as much as it affects you. It's easy to dismiss others' concerns or pretend that everything's okay. But it takes great strength to listen to your loved ones' fears and recognize when your substance use has become a problem.

Recognizing if you have a substance abuse problem

It's easy to slide from self-medicating an emotional or mental health problem into abusing drugs or alcohol.

A substance abuse problem is NOT defined by what drug you use or what you drink. Neither is it defined by when you use or even how much you use. It's the EFFECTS of your substance use that define a problem.

If your drinking or drug use is causing problems in your life or relationships, you have a substance abuse problem.

Dangers of self-medication

Trying to self-medicate a mental health issue can create a myriad of problems beyond the risk of [becoming addicted](#) to your substance of choice. Self-medicating can also:

Make symptoms worse. Trying to self-medicate a mental health issue can worsen existing symptoms or even generate new symptoms.

Interact with prescription medications. Abusing alcohol or drugs can interact with any other medications you're taking, either negating their effectiveness or causing unpleasant side effects.

Trigger new mental health problems. If you're already at risk for a mental health disorder, drinking heavily or using drugs could lead to the development of new problems—beyond those that prompted your self-medication in the first place. For example, opioid and alcohol use has been linked with [triggering depression](#), and marijuana and methamphetamine use with psychosis.

Delay or prevent you from seeking help. When you're set on a course of self-medicating it can be hard to change direction and seek healthier, more effective methods of dealing with your problems. Once you recognize how your substance use is only adding to your problems rather than solving them, though, you can move on to tackling the issues once and for all.

Self-help tip 1: Recognize your patterns

In order to find healthier and more effective ways of dealing with your problems and [managing your emotions](#), you need to first recognize when and how you're self-medicating. That means being honest with yourself—and those closest to you who have your best interests at heart.

Whether you're drinking or using drugs (or both), it's common to try to rationalize your substance use, underestimate how much or how often you use, or simply deny that you have a problem at all. You may try to shift all blame for your relationship troubles or financial worries, for example, onto outside causes.

The pandemic, the downturn in the economy, and [increasing unemployment](#) can leave anyone feeling stressed, anxious, or depressed. But it's also important to acknowledge how the time and money you spend drinking or using drugs could also be contributing to your problems.

Denial can also occur in mental health issues. You may feel ashamed to admit that you're struggling to cope with symptoms of depression or anxiety, for example. While it can seem easier to ignore your problems and hope they go away, overcoming denial is the first step to recovery.

Admitting you have a mental health problem is not a sign of weakness or some kind of character defect. Whatever problems you're facing, there are effective ways to cope and take back control of your life.

Keep a record of your substance use and moods. For several weeks, make a note of when you use alcohol or drugs, how much you use, and how you're feeling when you start—stressed, anxious, sad, bored, for example. Reviewing the results, you should be able to identify patterns and mood triggers in your substance use habits.

Try to not use for several days each week. Are you even able to avoid drugs or alcohol on some days? Make a note of how you feel on these days—do you feel less or more anxious, stressed, or depressed when you don't use? How well do you sleep? Can you fill the time by finding healthier and more effective ways of stabilizing your moods?

Tip 2: Change your beliefs

If you self-medicate your moods and emotions, chances are you look at your substance use in ways that make it seem more useful than it really is. For example, you may, like many people, drink alcohol as a nightcap to help you sleep. But while it can help you to fall asleep faster, alcohol will also disrupt your sleep. It can necessitate extra trips to the bathroom, aggravate breathing problems, interfere with the restorative REM-sleep phase of your sleep, and cause you to wake up earlier than normal. All this adds up to a poor quality night's sleep. By skipping the nightcap, it may take you longer to fall asleep but you'll sleep better and wake up feeling more refreshed and well-rested.

Similarly, you may use alcohol to improve your mood or as a coping mechanism for anxiety. While a few drinks can have the desired effect—making you feel happier or less anxious—because alcohol is a depressant, it will ultimately make you more anxious and depressed. Regular alcohol use depresses the central nervous system and decreases the levels of the brain chemical serotonin, leaving you feeling sadder and more prone to worrying than before.

[Read: Anxiety Disorders and Anxiety Attacks]

Even when you realize how your self-medicating is only temporarily masking your problems rather than serving any helpful purpose, it can be hard to shake the misconceptions and false beliefs you've built up in your mind. The more you challenge your beliefs about the benefits of self-medication, though, the less hold they'll maintain over your behavior. You can do that by replacing your substance use with more effective, healthier means of coping with your problems.

Tip 3: Find healthier ways to cope

It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that you're powerless against your mental health problems. But no matter what you're facing, there are always steps you can take to change how you feel and improve your symptoms—with or without professional help. Most people with depression, anxiety, or stress, for example, respond well to self-help steps such as:

Reaching out for social support. There is nothing more calming to your nervous system than chatting face-to-face with a friend or loved one. Even in times of social distancing, you can find ways to regularly connect with family and friends to ease your stress and anxiety and boost your mood.

Getting more exercise. Exercise triggers powerful changes in the brain that can boost your mood, burn off tension, and promote feelings of calm and well-being. Exercise can also serve as a valuable distraction, enabling you to break out of the cycle of negative thoughts that often fuel mood disorders.

Adopting a relaxation practice. Practicing a relaxation technique such as meditation, deep breathing, or yoga can help ease stress and leave you feeling calmer and more positive throughout the day.

Improving your sleep. A lack of sleep can make anxiety, depression, and stress worse, just as mood disorders—and the use of certain substances—can make it harder to get a good night’s sleep. By staying clean and adopting new daytime and bedtime habits, though, you can break the cycle and improve how [well you sleep](#) at night.

Eating a healthier diet. The food you eat can strongly influence your mood. Cutting down on sugar and junk food, eating more fresh fruit and vegetables, and increasing your intake of [omega-3 fatty acids](#) can help improve your outlook and boost your energy.

To cope with depression

When you’re depressed, it can feel like life is hopeless and helpless, with no light at the end of the tunnel. But there are many things you can do to lift and stabilize your mood—from challenging negative thinking to spending time in nature and scheduling fun activities into your day.

[\[Read: Coping with Depression\]](#)

Anxiety

Anxiety refers to a group of related disorders rather than a single condition. Some people suffer from intense panic attacks that strike without warning, while others may shudder at the thought of mingling at a party, or struggle with irrational fears, intrusive thoughts, or uncontrollable worries.

Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health issues—and are highly treatable. Worrying, for example, is a mental habit you can learn how to break.

[\[Read: How to Stop Worrying\]](#)

Stress

It may seem like there’s nothing you can do about stress. The bills keep piling up, there are never enough hours in the day, and your work and family responsibilities are never-ending. But there’s still plenty you can do to keep your stress levels in check—whether your stress tends to occur at predictable times or takes you by surprise.

[\[Read: Stress Management\]](#)

Tip 4: Combine treatments

If self-medicating a mental health issue has triggered a substance abuse problem (addiction or dependency), it’s known as a dual diagnosis or co-occurring disorder. To get [help for a co-occurring disorder](#), you’ll need to simultaneously address both the substance abuse problem and the mental health issue that triggered your drug or alcohol use in the first place.

Treatment for your substance abuse may include detoxification, managing withdrawal, in-person or [online therapy](#), and/or attending peer support groups. Depending on the severity of the substance abuse problem, some people are able to achieve and maintain sobriety on their own with the support of friends and loved ones, while others need professional help.

Treatment for your mental health problem may include a combination of self-help steps, healthy lifestyle changes, individual or group therapy, and medication.

How to help someone who's self-medicating

[Helping a loved one who's self-medicating](#) can be an uphill struggle. You need to overcome any denial about their issues or substance use, help them recognize why they're self-medicating, and then deal with both the underlying condition and the problems created by their drinking or drug use.

[\[Read: Helping Someone with a Drug Addiction\]](#)

It's important to remember that you can't do the hard work of dealing with your loved one's problems for them. You can't force someone to deal with their mental health condition any more than you can force them to remain sober. But you can encourage your loved one to seek help and offer your love and support.

Talk to the person. When you're both sober and calm, talk to your loved one about the damaging behaviors and issues that you've noticed. Encourage them to open up to you by listening, without being judgmental or accusatory.

Learn all you can about the person's underlying mental health issue that's causing them to self-medicate. The more you understand what your loved one is going through, the better able you'll be to support their recovery.

Encourage your loved one to seek help. Suggest a general check-up with a physician and even offer to go along with them on the first visit. Talking about the reasons for self-medicating with a professional may help them to see their problems more clearly.

Don't drink or use drugs with your loved one or argue about their substance use when they're impaired. Instead, fill the time you spend together with fun, healthy activities and hobbies that don't involve drinking or drug use.

Encourage social interaction. When someone's depressed, anxious, or experiencing another mental health issue, it can be tempting for them to retreat into their shell. But social contact and support from friends and relatives is vital to their recovery.

Set boundaries. Be realistic about the amount of care and time you can offer your loved one without feeling overwhelmed yourself. Set limits on disruptive behaviors and stick to them. Letting your friend or loved one's problems take over your life isn't healthy for either of you.

Be patient. [Recovering from depression](#), anxiety, or any other condition that's prompted their self-medication doesn't happen overnight. Recovery is an ongoing process and relapse is common. Be patient, encouraging, and supportive.

Seek your own support. It's easy to get worn down by your loved one's problems. Talk to someone you trust about what you're going through. It may even help to [get your own therapy](#) or join a support group for people facing similar issues.

Helplines

In the U.S.	Call the NAMI HelpLine at 1-800-950-6264 or the SAMHSA helpline at 1-800-662-4357.
UK	Call the SANEline at 07984 967 708.
Australia	Call the Sane Helpline at 1800 187 263.
Canada	Visit Mood Disorders Society of Canada for links to provincial helplines.
India	Call the Vandrevala Foundation Helpline at 1860 2662 345.

More Information

Helpful links

01. [Substance Use Disorders](#) - The relationship between anxiety and substance use. (ADAA)
02. [Comorbidity: Addiction and Other Mental Illnesses](#) - The link between substance abuse and mental health. (National Institute on Drug Abuse)
03. [Mental Health Disorders and Teen Substance Use](#) - Why it's especially risky for kids with emotional or behavioral challenges to drink or use drugs. (Child Mind Institute)

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DEPRESSION

I Feel Depressed: 9 Ways to Deal with Depression

Feeling persistently sad, numb, worthless, fatigued, or trapped in negativity? Depression affects people in many different ways, but this toolkit offers simple tips to improve how you feel right now.

By [Lawrence Robinson](#) and [Sheldon Reid](#)

Last updated or reviewed on March 7, 2024

Why am I depressed?

Feelings of sadness can quickly come and go, but when you're depressed, these negative feelings stubbornly persist. Depression symptoms such as hopelessness, fatigue, lack of appetite, and decreased interest in school, work, or hobbies can arise for a variety of reasons. Your genetic makeup can make you more susceptible to depression, but stressful life events such as divorce, job loss, or past trauma often play a role. Substance abuse and loneliness can also contribute to feelings of depression.

If you're feeling depressed, know that you're far from alone. Research indicates that about 280 million people in the world suffer with depression. It can impact your work life, social life, and even your physical health. In severe cases, professional treatment may be necessary for recovery. But there are also a number of steps you can try for yourself to help boost your mood and improve how you feel.

What to do if you feel depressed tip 1: Talk to someone

The simple act of talking to someone who cares about you is crucial to [dealing with feelings of depression](#). Know that reaching out is not a sign of weakness and won't make you a burden. The person you talk to doesn't have to be able to fix you; they just need to listen without being distracted or judging you.

Turn to people you trust. Talk to a close friend or family member about what you're going through. Face-to-face interactions are best for boosting your mood, so schedule an in-person chat if possible.

Rely on technology when needed. When you feel sapped of energy, you might have a harder time being motivated to hang out with friends and family in-person. However, you may find it easier to stay in touch via video, phone, or text.

Prioritize giving and receiving support. Attending a support group for people with depression can offer an opportunity to draw comfort from others who are experiencing similar issues—and offer your own support in return. You'll get to trade stories and receive coping advice from other people in the group who understand what you're going through at the moment. If you feel uncomfortable with in-person support groups, some [online therapy platforms](#) offer virtual support groups.

Tip 2: Get moving

It's probably the last thing you feel like doing right now—but getting active, even for a short period, is one of the most effective ways of boosting your mood. In fact, regular exercise can be just as effective as antidepressant medication in easing depression. And you don't need to join an expensive gym or health club to reap the benefits.

- Take a short, 15-minute walk to boost your mood for several hours.
- Cycle, jog, or walk through a park or other green space.
- Dance to your favorite music.
- Play with your dog or kids.
- Try in-person or online exercise classes for aerobics, interval training, or Pilates.
- Create a simple home gym using resistance bands, water bottles, or your own body weight.
- Stretch or practice simple yoga poses.

[[Read: The Mental Health Benefits of Exercise](#)]

Tip 3: Reframe negative thoughts

While external factors such as isolation, financial worries, or fears about your health can contribute to depression, so too can the way you think. But there are ways of looking at your situation in a more realistic, hopeful way.

- 011. Note when you have a negative thought** such as “I'll never be able to pay the mortgage and I'll lose my home,” or “Everyone thinks I'm a loser.”
- 022. Challenge the thought** by asking yourself “Do I know that for sure?” or “What would I say to a close friend who had the same thought?”
- 033. Change the thought** to a more helpful way of thinking. “I can renegotiate mortgage payments with the bank” or “I've made it through bad times before. I can do it again.”

Tip 4: Find hope and contentment within

It's natural to blame life circumstances for how you feel—especially in these difficult times. But there are ways to find contentment within, regardless of your situation.

Be your own friend. Instead of rehashing past mistakes, focusing on the negative aspects of your life, or dwelling on worst-case scenarios, talk to yourself in a kinder, more realistic way—the same way you’d expect a caring friend to talk to you.

Pat yourself on the back. Take a moment to acknowledge your role in the successes you’ve experienced in life and give yourself credit.

Change your morning thoughts. Before you go to sleep, write down something positive you can read as soon as you wake up in the morning—a hope you have for the day or something you’re grateful for.

Tip 5: Add mindfulness to your day

Mindfulness is the practice of focusing your attention on the present moment and accepting it without judgment. It can prevent you from getting caught up in worries about the future or regrets about the past.

Listen to a favorite song. Sit somewhere comfortable and give your attention fully to the music, even if it’s a song you’ve heard a thousand times before. Allow yourself to be present in the moment.

Try a mindful chore. Complete a household chore such as washing dishes while giving your attention fully to the task. Notice how things feel, smell, or sound and whenever your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the task.

Meditate. HelpGuide’s [Mindful Breathing Meditation](#) can help you harness the power of your breath to ground yourself in the present moment and find inner calm.

Tip 6: Express gratitude

When you’re depressed, everything in life can seem bleak and hopeless. But even on the darkest days, it’s usually possible to find one thing you can be grateful about—the beauty of a sunset, the feeling of the wind on your face, or a phone call from a friend, for example. Acknowledging gratitude for even the smallest things in life can give you a break from negative thinking and instill hope back into your day.

- Take a deep breath and think of one thing you’re grateful for: your children, your home, your pet, or even a smile from a stranger, for example.
- Before you switch off the light at night, take a moment to write down something that made you grateful today. Focus your mind on it as you fall asleep.
- Try HelpGuide’s [Gratitude in Difficult Times](#) meditation to help you find a more grateful mindset, even when you’re feeling down or despairing.

[[Read: Gratitude: The Benefits and How to Practice It](#)]

Tip 7: Savor simple sources of joy

You can't just will yourself out of depression or force yourself to feel happier, but there are things you can do throughout the day to [find joy](#), boost your mood, and ease stress.

- Listen to uplifting music, watch funny videos online, or download episodes of your favorite sitcom.
- Try to spend some time in nature—go for a walk in the park or find a new hiking trail.
- Help a friend or neighbor with an errand. Helping others can be just as beneficial to you as it is for them.
- Take a class either online or in-person, listen to a lecture, or take a tour of a museum.
- Take up a new hobby, learn to play an instrument, or write your memoirs—anything that brings you a sense of joy and fulfillment.

Tip 8: Get a daily dose of sunlight

When you're feeling low, you might be tempted to close the blinds and self-isolate indoors. However, sunlight helps to boost serotonin levels and improve your outlook. Therefore, it's important to try to expose yourself to sunlight for at least 15 minutes a day. This is especially important during winter, when the [reduced daylight hours](#) can take a serious toll on your mood.

- Take a walk at lunchtime, drink your morning coffee outside, or spend time outdoors exercising or doing yardwork.
- Increase the amount of natural light in your home by opening blinds and drapes and sitting near windows.
- Paint your walls in lighter colors or use daylight simulation bulbs.
- If you live somewhere with little winter sunshine, try using a light therapy box.

Tip 9: Don't ignore thoughts of suicide

Depression is a major risk factor for suicide. If the deep despair and hopelessness that accompanies depression makes suicide feel like the only way to escape the pain, please reach out for help.

While your problems may seem overwhelming and permanent now, with time you will feel better, especially if you get help. There are many people who want to support you during this difficult time, so please reach out!

Read [Are You Feeling Suicidal?](#), call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) in the U.S. at 1-800-273-8255, find a helpline in your country at [Befrienders Worldwide](#), or use HelpGuide's [Directory of International Mental Health Helplines](#).

More Information

Helpful links

01. [Treatment Options](#) - Explore the different treatments available for depression. (Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance)
02. [Depression: Back from the Bluez](#) - Self-help modules for coping with and recovering from depression. (Center for Clinical Interventions)
03. [What Causes Depression?](#) - Including genes, temperament, stressful life events, and medical issues. (Harvard Health Publishing)

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WELL-BEING & HAPPINESS

Social Media and Mental Health

While many of us enjoy staying connected on social media, excessive use can fuel feelings of addiction, anxiety, depression, isolation, and FOMO. Here's how to modify your habits and improve your mood.

By [Lawrence Robinson](#) and [Melinda Smith, M.A.](#)

Last updated or reviewed on February 5, 2024

The role social media plays in mental health

Human beings are social creatures. We need the companionship of others to thrive in life, and the strength of our connections has a huge impact on our mental health and happiness. Being socially connected to others can ease stress, anxiety, and depression, boost self-worth, provide comfort and joy, prevent loneliness, and even add years to your life. On the flip side, lacking strong social connections can pose a serious risk to your mental and emotional health.

In today's world, many of us rely on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube, and Instagram to find and connect with each other. While each has its benefits, it's important to remember that social media can never be a replacement for real-world human connection. It requires in-person contact with others to trigger the hormones that alleviate stress and make you feel happier, healthier, and more positive. Ironically for a technology that's designed to bring people closer together, spending too much time engaging with social media can actually make you feel more lonely and isolated—and exacerbate mental health problems such as [anxiety](#) and [depression](#).

If you're spending an excessive amount of time on social media and feelings of sadness, dissatisfaction, frustration, or [loneliness](#) are impacting your life, it may be time to re-examine your online habits and find a healthier balance.

The positive aspects of social media

While virtual interaction on social media doesn't have the same psychological benefits as face-to-face contact, there are still many positive ways in which it can help you stay connected and support your wellbeing.

Social media enables you to:

- Communicate and stay up to date with family and friends around the world.

- Find new friends and communities; network with other people who share similar interests or ambitions.
- Join or promote worthwhile causes; raise awareness on important issues.
- Seek or offer emotional support during tough times.
- Find vital social connection if you live in a remote area, for example, or have limited independence, social anxiety, or are part of a marginalized group.
- Find an outlet for your creativity and self-expression.
- Discover (with care) sources of valuable information and learning.

The negative aspects of social media

Since it's a relatively new technology, there's little research to establish the long-term consequences, good or bad, of social media use. However, multiple studies have found a strong link between heavy social media and an increased risk for depression, anxiety, loneliness, [self-harm](#), and even [suicidal thoughts](#).

Social media may promote negative experiences such as:

Inadequacy about your life or appearance. Even if you know that images you're viewing on social media are manipulated, they can still make you feel insecure about how you look or what's going on in your own life. Similarly, we're all aware that other people tend to share just the highlights of their lives, rarely the low points that everyone experiences. But that doesn't lessen those feelings of envy and dissatisfaction when you're scrolling through a friend's airbrushed photos of their tropical beach holiday or reading about their exciting new promotion at work.

Fear of missing out (FOMO) and social media addiction. While FOMO has been around far longer than social media, sites such as Facebook and Instagram seem to exacerbate feelings that others are having more fun or living better lives than you are. The idea that you're missing out on certain things can impact your self-esteem, trigger anxiety, and fuel even greater social media use, much like an addiction. FOMO can compel you to pick up your phone every few minutes to check for updates, or compulsively respond to each and every alert—even if that means taking risks while you're driving, missing out on sleep at night, or prioritizing social media interaction over real world relationships.

Isolation. A study at the University of Pennsylvania found that high usage of Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram increases rather decreases [feelings of loneliness](#). Conversely, the study found that reducing social media usage can actually make you feel less lonely and isolated and improve your overall wellbeing.

Depression and anxiety. Human beings need face-to-face contact to be mentally healthy. Nothing reduces stress and boosts your mood faster or more effectively than eye-to-eye contact with someone who cares about you. The more you prioritize social media interaction over in-person relationships, the more you're at risk for developing or exacerbating mood disorders such as anxiety and [depression](#).

Cyberbullying. About 10 percent of teens report [being bullied](#) on social media and many other users are subjected to offensive comments. Social media platforms such as Twitter can be hotspots for spreading hurtful rumors, lies, and abuse that can leave lasting emotional scars.

Self-absorption. Sharing endless selfies and all your innermost thoughts on social media can create an unhealthy self-centeredness and distance you from real-life connections.

What's driving your social media use?

These days, most of us access social media via our smartphones or tablets. While this makes it very convenient to keep in touch, it also means that social media is always accessible. This round-the-clock, hyper connectivity can trigger impulse control problems, the constant alerts and notifications affecting your concentration and focus, disturbing your sleep, and making you [a slave to your phone](#).

Social media platforms are designed to snare your attention, keep you online, and have you repeatedly checking your screen for updates. It's how the companies make money. But, much like a gambling compulsion or an addiction to nicotine, alcohol, or drugs, social media use can create psychological cravings. When you receive a like, a share, or a favorable reaction to a post, it can trigger the release of dopamine in the brain, the same "reward" chemical that follows winning on a slot machine, taking a bite of chocolate, or lighting up a cigarette, for example. The more you're rewarded, the more time you want to spend on social media, even if it becomes detrimental to other aspects of your life.

Other causes of unhealthy social media use

A fear of missing out (FOMO) can keep you returning to social media over and over again. Even though there are very few things that can't wait or need an immediate response, FOMO will have you believing otherwise. Perhaps you're worried that you'll be left out of the conversation at school or work if you miss the latest news or gossip on social media? Or maybe you feel that your relationships will suffer if you don't immediately like, share, or respond to other people's posts? Or you could be worried you'll miss out on an invitation or that other people are having a better time than you.

Many of us use social media as a "security blanket". Whenever we're in a social situation and feel anxious, awkward, or lonely, we turn to our phones and log on to social media. Of course, interacting with social media only denies you the face-to-face interaction that can [help to ease anxiety](#).

Your heavy social media use could be masking other underlying problems, such as stress, depression, or boredom. If you spend more time on social media when you're feeling down, lonely, or bored, you may be using it as a way to distract yourself from unpleasant feelings or self-soothe your moods. While it can be difficult at first, allowing yourself to feel can open you up to finding healthier ways to [manage your moods](#).

The vicious cycle of unhealthy social media use

Excessive social media use can create a negative, self-perpetuating cycle:

- 01.** When you feel lonely, depressed, anxious, or stressed, you use social media more often—as a way to relieve boredom or feel connected to others.
- 02.** Using social media more often, though, increases FOMO and feelings of inadequacy, dissatisfaction, and isolation.
- 03.** In turn, these feelings negatively affect your mood and worsen symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress.
- 04.** These worsening symptoms cause you to use social media even more, and so the downward spiral continues.

Signs that social media is impacting your mental health

Everyone is different and there is no specific amount of time spent on social media, or the frequency you check for updates, or the number of posts you make that indicates your use is becoming unhealthy. Rather, it has to do with the impact time spent on social media has on your mood and other aspects of your life, along with your motivations for using it.

For example, your social media use may be problematic if it causes you to neglect face-to-face relationships, distracts you from work or school, or leaves you feeling envious, angry, or depressed. Similarly, if you're motivated to use social media just because you're bored or lonely, or want to post something to make others jealous or upset, it may be time to reassess your social media habits.

Indicators that social media may be adversely affecting your mental health include:

Spending more time on social media than with real world friends. Using social media has become a substitute for a lot of your offline social interaction. Even if you're out with friends, you still feel the need to constantly check social media, often driven by feelings that others may be having more fun than you.

Comparing yourself unfavorably with others on social media. You have low self-esteem or negative body image. You may even have patterns of disordered eating.

Experiencing cyberbullying. Or you worry that you have no control over the things people post about you.

Being distracted at school or work. You feel pressure to post regular content about yourself, get comments or likes on your posts, or respond quickly and enthusiastically to friends' posts.

Having no time for self-reflection. Every spare moment is filled by engaging with social media, leaving you little or no time for reflecting on who you are, what you think, or why you act the way that you do—the things that allow you to grow as a person.

Engaging in risky behavior in order to gain likes, shares, or positive reactions on social media. You play dangerous pranks, post embarrassing material, cyberbully others, or access your phone while driving or in other unsafe situations.

[\[Read: Dealing with Revenge Porn and "Sextortion"\]](#)

Suffering from sleep problems. Do you check social media last thing at night, first thing in the morning, or even when you wake up in the night? The light from phones and other devices can [disrupt your sleep](#), which in turn can have a serious impact on your mental health.

Worsening symptoms of anxiety or depression. Rather than helping to alleviate negative feelings and boost your mood, you feel more anxious, depressed, or lonely after using social media.

Modifying social media use to improve mental health step 1: Reduce time online

A 2018 University of Pennsylvania study found that reducing social media use to 30 minutes a day resulted in a significant reduction in levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleep problems, and FOMO. But you don't need to cut back on your social media use that drastically to improve your mental health. The same study concluded that just being more mindful of your social media use can have beneficial results on your mood and focus.

While 30 minutes a day may not be a realistic target for many of us—let alone a full “social media detox”—we can still benefit from reducing the amount of time we spend on social media. For most of us, that means reducing how much we use our smartphones. The following tips can help:

- 01. Use an app to track how much time you spend on social media each day.** Then set a goal for how much you want to reduce it by.
- 02. Turn off your phone at certain times of the day,** such as when you're driving, in a meeting, at the gym, having dinner, spending time with offline friends, or playing with your kids. Don't take your phone with you to the bathroom.
- 03. Don't bring your phone or tablet to bed.** Turn devices off and leave them in another room overnight to charge.
- 04. Disable social media notifications.** It's hard to resist the constant buzzing, beeping, and dinging of your phone alerting you to new messages. Turning off notifications can help you regain control of your time and focus.
- 05. Limit checks.** If you compulsively check your phone every few minutes, wean yourself off by limiting your checks to once every 15 minutes. Then once every 30 minutes, then once an hour. There are apps that can automatically limit when you're able to access your phone.
- 06. Try removing social media apps from your phone** so you can only check Facebook, Twitter and the like from your tablet or computer. If this sounds like too drastic a step, try removing one social media app at a time to see how much you really miss it.

For more tips on reducing your overall phone use, read [Smartphone Addiction](#).

Step 2: Change your focus

Many of us access social media purely out of habit or to mindlessly kill moments of downtime. But by focusing on your motivation for logging on, you can not only reduce the time you spend on social media, you can also improve your experience and avoid many of the negative aspects.

If you're accessing social media to find specific information, check on a friend who's been ill, or share new photos of your kids with family, for example, your experience is likely to be very different than if you're logging on simply because you're bored, you want to see how many likes you got from a previous post, or to check if you're missing out on something.

Next time you go to access social media, pause for a moment and clarify your motivation for doing so.

Are you using social media as a substitute for real life? Is there a healthier substitute for your social media use? If you're lonely, for example, invite a friend out for coffee instead. Feeling depressed? Take a walk or go to the gym. Bored? Take up a new hobby. Social media may be quick and convenient, but there are often healthier, more effective ways to satisfy a craving.

Are you an active or a passive user on social media? Passively scrolling through posts or anonymously following the interaction of others on social media doesn't provide any meaningful sense of connection. It may even increase feelings of isolation. Being an active participant, though, will offer you more engagement with others.

Does social media leave you feeling inadequate or disappointed about your life? You can counter symptoms of FOMO by focusing on what you have, rather than what you lack. Make a list of all the positive aspects of your life and read it back when you feel you're missing out on something better. And remember: no one's life is ever as perfect as it seems on social media. We all deal with heartache, self-doubt, and disappointment, even if we choose not to share it online.

Step 3: Spend more time with offline friends

We all need the face-to-face company of others to be happy and healthy. At its best, social media is a great tool for facilitating real-life connections. But if you've allowed virtual connections to replace real-life friendships in your life, there are plenty of ways to [build meaningful connections](#) without relying on social media.

Set aside time each week to interact offline with friends and family. Try to make it a regular get-together where you always keep your phones off.

If you've neglected face-to-face friendships, reach out to an old friend (or an online friend) and arrange to meet up. If you both lead busy lives, offer to run errands or [exercise together](#).

Join a club. Find a hobby, creative endeavor, or [fitness activity](#) you enjoy and join a group of like-minded individuals that meet on a regular basis.

Don't let social awkwardness stand in the way. Even if you're shy, there are proven techniques to [overcome insecurity and build friendships](#).

If you don't feel that you have anyone to spend time with, reach out to acquaintances. Lots of other people feel just as uncomfortable about making new friends as you do—so be the one to break the ice. Invite a coworker out for lunch or ask a neighbor or classmate to join you for coffee.

Interact with strangers. Look up from your screen and connect with people you cross paths with on public transport, at the coffee shop, or in the grocery store. Simply smiling or saying hello will improve how you feel—and you never know where it may lead.

Step 4: Express gratitude

Feeling and expressing gratitude about the important things in your life can be a welcome relief to the resentment, animosity, and discontent sometimes generated by social media.

Take time for reflection. Try keeping a gratitude journal or using a gratitude app. Keep track of all the great memories and positives in your life—as well as those things and people you'd miss if they were suddenly absent from your life. If you're more prone to venting or negative posts, you can even express your gratitude on social media—although you may benefit more from private reflection that isn't subject to the scrutiny of others.

[\[Read: Gratitude: The Benefits and How to Practice It\]](#)

Practice mindfulness. Experiencing FOMO and comparing yourself unfavorably to others keeps you dwelling on life's disappointments and frustrations. Instead of being fully engaged in the present, you're focused on the "what ifs" and the "if onlys" that prevent you from having a life that matches those you see on social media. By [practicing mindfulness](#), you can learn to live more in the present moment, lessen the impact of FOMO, and improve your overall mental wellbeing.

Volunteer. Just as human beings are hard-wired to seek social connection, we're also hard-wired to give to others. [Helping other people or animals](#) not only enriches your community and benefits a cause that's important to you, but it also makes you feel happier and more grateful.

Helping a child or teen with unhealthy social media use

Childhood and the teenage years can be filled with developmental challenges and social pressures. For some kids, social media has a way of exacerbating those problems and fueling anxiety, bullying, depression, and issues with self-esteem. If you're worried about your child's social media use, it can be tempting to simply confiscate their phone or other device. But that can create further problems, separating your child from their friends and the positive aspects of social media. Instead, there are other ways to help your child use Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms in a more responsible way.

Monitor and limit your child's social media use. The more you know about how your child is interacting on social media, the better you'll be able to address any problems. Parental control apps can help limit your child's data usage or restrict their phone use to certain times of the day. You can also adjust privacy settings on the different platforms to limit their potential exposure to bullies or predators.

Talk to your child about underlying issues. Problems with social media use can often mask deeper issues. Is your child having problems fitting in at school? Are they suffering from shyness or social anxiety? Are problems at home causing them stress?

Enforce "social media" breaks. For example, you could ban social media until your child has completed their homework in the evening, not allow phones at the dinner table or in their bedroom, and plan family activities that preclude the use of phones or other devices. To prevent sleep problems, always insist phones are turned off at least one hour before bed.

Teach your child how social media is not an accurate reflection of people's lives. They shouldn't compare themselves or their lives negatively to others on social media. People only post what they want others to see. Images are manipulated or carefully posed and selected. And having fewer friends on social media doesn't make your child less popular or less worthy.

Encourage exercise and offline interests. Get your child away from social media by encouraging them to pursue physical activities and hobbies that involve real-world interaction. [Exercise is great for relieving anxiety and stress](#), boosting self-esteem, and improving mood—and is something you can do as a family. The more engaged your child is offline, the less their mood and sense of self-worth will be dependent on how many friends, likes, or shares they have on social media.

More Information

Helpful links

01. [Social media use increases depression and loneliness](#) - Details study linking time spent on social media with decreased wellbeing. (Penn Today, University of Pennsylvania)
02. [Social media, young people and mental health](#) - Briefing paper analyzing the impact of social media. (Centre for Mental Health)
03. [Does Social Media Cause Depression?](#) - How heavy Instagram and Facebook use may be affecting kids negatively. (Child Mind Institute)

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