



## Coping with Depression

Tips for Overcoming Depression One Step at a Time

[Español \(/es/articulos/depresion/haciendole-frente-a-la-depresion.htm\)](/es/articulos/depresion/haciendole-frente-a-la-depresion.htm)



Depression drains your energy, hope, and drive, making it difficult to do what you need to feel better. But while overcoming depression isn't quick or easy, it's far from impossible. You can't just will yourself to "snap out of it," but 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. Feeling better takes time, but you can get there if you make positive choices for yourself each day.

### What is the best way to cope with depression?

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It's the Catch-22 of depression: recovering from depression requires action, but taking action when you're depressed is hard. Draw upon whatever resources you have. You may not have much energy, but you probably have enough to take a short walk around the block or pick up the phone to call a loved one. The tips that follow are based on a comprehensive approach that helps you get support while making lifestyle changes and reversing negative thinking. If you continue to take positive steps day by day, you'll soon find yourself feeling better.

## Tip 1: Reach out and stay connected



When you're depressed, the tendency is to withdraw and isolate. Even reaching out to close family members and friends can be tough. Compound that with the feelings of shame and the guilt you may feel at neglecting your relationships.

But social support is absolutely essential to depression recovery. Staying connected to other people and the outside world will make a world of difference in your mood and outlook. And if you don't feel that you have anyone to turn to, it's never too late to [build new friendships](/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm) and improve your support network.

### Ways to reach out

**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; he or she just needs 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 lifting the fog of 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](/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm), be a listening ear for a friend, do something nice for somebody.

## Ways to reach out

**Care for a pet.** While nothing can replace the human connection, [pets can bring joy and companionship into your life](/articles/mental-health/mood-boosting-power-of-dogs.htm) 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.

### 10 tips for reaching out and staying connected

1. Talk to one person about your feelings
2. Help someone else by volunteering
3. Have lunch or coffee with a friend
4. Ask a loved one to check in with you regularly
5. Accompany someone to the movies, a concert, or a small get-together
6. Call or email an old friend
7. Go for a walk with a workout buddy
8. Schedule a weekly dinner date
9. 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.

## Support your health

**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](#). (/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm)

**Expose yourself to a little sunlight every day.** Lack of sunlight can make depression worse. Take a short walk outdoors, have your coffee outside, enjoy an *al fresco* meal, people-watch on a park bench, or sit out in the garden. Aim for at least 15 minutes of sunlight a day to boost your mood. If you live somewhere with little winter sunshine, try using a light therapy box.

**Practice relaxation techniques.** [A daily relaxation practice](#) (/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm) 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.

### Develop a "wellness toolbox" to deal with depression

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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.

1. Spend some time in nature
2. List what you like about yourself
3. Read a good book
4. Watch a funny movie or TV show
5. Take a long, hot bath
6. Take care of a few small tasks
7. Play with a pet
8. Talk to friends or family face-to-face
9. Listen to music
10. Do something spontaneous

### Tip 3: Move vigorously during the day

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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](/articles/healthy-living/how-to-start-exercising-and-stick-to-it.htm)—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 exhausted. But research shows that your energy levels will improve if you keep with it. You will be less fatigued, not more, once it's part of your routine.

**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.

### Tip 4: Eat a healthy, mood-boosting diet

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What you eat has a direct impact on the way you feel. Reduce your intake of foods that can adversely affect your brain and mood, such as caffeine, alcohol, trans fats, and foods with high levels of chemical preservatives or hormones (such as certain 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.

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

Foods rich in certain omega-3 fats called EPA and DHA can give your mood a big boost. The best sources are fatty fish such as salmon, herring, mackerel, anchovies, sardines, tuna, and some cold-water fish oil supplements. Aim for two servings a week. See: [Choosing Healthy Fats](/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-fats.htm) (/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-fats.htm)

## Tip 5: 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. 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, 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. See [Seasonal Affective Disorder](/articles/depression/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad.htm) (/articles/depression/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad.htm).

## Tip 6: 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 remind yourself that this is the depression talking. 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. Just telling yourself to “think positive” won't cut it. Often, they're part of a lifelong pattern of thinking that's become so automatic you're not even completely aware of it.

### 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 (“She said she had a good time on our date, but I think she was just being nice.”)

## Negative, unrealistic ways of thinking that fuel depression

**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. I really am no good!”)

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

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

### Put your thoughts on the witness stand

Once you identify the destructive thoughts patterns that you default to, 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.

## When to get professional help

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](/articles/depression/depression-treatment.htm) (/articles/depression/depression-treatment.htm) and you can feel better!

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



## More help for depression

[Depression Treatment: \(/articles/depression/depression-treatment.htm\)](/articles/depression/depression-treatment.htm)  
Therapy, Medication, and Lifestyle Changes That Can Help

[Helping Someone with Depression: \(/articles/depression/helping-someone-with-depression.htm\)](/articles/depression/helping-someone-with-depression.htm) Taking Care of Yourself While Supporting a Loved One

[Antidepressant Medication: \(/articles/depression/antidepressant-medication.htm\)](/articles/depression/antidepressant-medication.htm) What You Need to Know About Depression Medication

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