



## Depression in Women

Signs, Symptoms and How to Feel Better



Depression can drain you of energy and hope, leaving you feeling empty, sad, and helpless. And, for women, depression is complicated by many factors—from reproductive hormones and social pressures to the unique female response to stress. No matter how bleak things seem, though, there’s a lot you can do to change the way you think and feel. You can’t just will yourself to “snap out of it,” but you do have more control than you realize. By taking small but important steps, you can start to feel better and regain your drive, your sense of hope, and your enjoyment of life.

### Signs and symptoms of depression in women

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One in every eight women will experience depression symptoms at some point during their lifetime—you are not alone! It’s important to learn about the signs and symptoms as well as 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.

Symptoms can include:

- ▶ Depressed mood
- ▶ Loss of interest or pleasure in activities you used to enjoy
- ▶ Lack of energy and fatigue
- ▶ Feelings of guilt, hopelessness and worthlessness

- ▶ Appetite and weight changes
- ▶ Sleep changes (sleeping more or sleeping less)
- ▶ Difficulty concentrating
- ▶ Suicidal thoughts or recurrent thoughts of death

### If you're feeling suicidal...

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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 \(/home-pages/suicide-prevention.htm\)](/home-pages/suicide-prevention.htm) articles or call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline \(https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/\)](https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/) at 1-800-273-8255.

For helplines outside the U.S., visit [Befrienders Worldwide \(https://www.befrienders.org/\)](https://www.befrienders.org/).

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

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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 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.

Ask for the help and support you need—it can make all the difference in your recovery. Share what you're going through with the people you love and trust. You may have avoided 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 \(/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm\)](/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm)—even if you're shy or introverted.

## 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](/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm), 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](/articles/mental-health/mood-boosting-power-of-dogs.htm) (/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.

**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

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

**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](/articles/stress/stress-management.amp.htm) (/articles/stress/stress-management.amp.htm).

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

**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

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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: Get up and get moving

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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—and one of the most important tools in your recovery arsenal.

Studies show that [regular exercise can be as effective as antidepressant medication \(/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm\)](/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm) 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.



(/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm)

[The Mental Health Benefits of Exercise: \(/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm\)](/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm) For Depression, Anxiety, and Stress

**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 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

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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:

**Reducing your intake of salt, unhealthy fats, caffeine, simple carbohydrates, and alcohol,** which can [quickly lead to a crash in mood and energy](/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-carbs.htm) (/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-carbs.htm).

**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 get more, take a B-complex vitamin supplement or eat more citrus fruit, leafy greens, beans, chicken, and eggs.

**Eating foods with Omega-3 fatty acids to boost mood.** [Omega-3 fatty acids](/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-fats.htm) (/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-fats.htm) 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.



(/articles/healthy-eating/diet-and-nutrition-tips-for-women.htm)

[Diet and Nutrition Tips for Women:](/articles/healthy-eating/diet-and-nutrition-tips-for-women.htm) (/articles/healthy-eating/diet-and-nutrition-tips-for-women.htm) Eating to Look and Feel Your Best

**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

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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, 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 \(SAD\)](/articles/depression/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad.htm) (/articles/depression/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad.htm). 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 hopeless you feel, though, there are plenty of things you can do to keep your mood stable throughout the year.

## Tip 6: Challenge negative thinking

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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 negative thoughts 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.

Women tend to ruminate when they are depressed. This includes crying to relieve emotional tension, trying to figure out why you're depressed, and talking to your friends about your depression. However, rumination has been found to maintain depression and even make it worse. 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 I fall short of perfection, I'm a total failure.")

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

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

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

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

**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 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. In the process, you'll develop a more balanced perspective and help to relieve your depression.



## Get professional help if needed

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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.

**Medication.** [Antidepressant medication \(/articles/depression/antidepressant-medication.htm\)](/articles/depression/antidepressant-medication.htm) 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.

**Therapy.** Talk therapy is an extremely effective treatment for depression in women. 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 \(/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm\)](/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm) will be a caring and supportive partner in your depression treatment and recovery.

## Causes of depression in women

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There is no simple, singular, cause for depression in women. Depression can be triggered by many different combinations of social, psychological and biological factors.

General causes of depression can include:

1. Loneliness and isolation
2. Lack of social support
3. Recent stressful life experiences
4. Family history of depression
5. Marital or relationship problems
6. Financial strain
7. Early childhood trauma or abuse
8. Alcohol or drug abuse
9. Unemployment or underemployment
10. Health problems or chronic pain

## Social, biological, and hormonal 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 especially hormonal factors that are specific to women.

In addition to general causes of depression, women can face:

**Body image issues** which increase in girls during the sexual development of puberty.

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

**Stress** - Women produce more stress hormones, and the female sex hormone progesterone prevents the stress hormone system from turning itself off as it does in men.

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

**Premenstrual problems** - For many women, premenstrual syndrome (PMS) is mild but for some women, symptoms are more severe and disabling and may warrant a diagnosis of premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD). PMDD is characterized by severe depression, irritability, and other mood disturbances.

**Pregnancy and infertility** - The many hormonal changes that occur during pregnancy can contribute to depression. Other issues relating to pregnancy such as miscarriage, unwanted pregnancy, and infertility can also play a role in depression.

**Postpartum depression** - Many women experience the "baby blues", however, some women experience severe, lasting depression. This condition is called [postpartum depression](/articles/depression/postpartum-depression-and-the-baby-blues.htm) (/articles/depression/postpartum-depression-and-the-baby-blues.htm) and is thought to be influenced, at least in part, by hormonal fluctuations.

**Menopause and perimenopause** (the stage leading to menopause when reproductive hormones rapidly fluctuate).

### 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.

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