

Recognizing the Symptoms of Depression

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Natural Depression Treatments

15 ways to help treat depression naturally.

By [R. Morgan Griffin](#)
WebMD Feature

Reviewed by [Louise Chang, MD](#)

While therapy and medication are key in controlling depression, there's also a lot you can do on your own to fight back. Making changes to your own behavior -- your physical activity, diet, and lifestyle -- can be effective natural depression treatments.

"Lifestyle changes are a very important part of treatment," says Ian A. Cook, MD, director of the Depression Research Program at the University of California Los Angeles.

On their own, Cook says, natural depression treatments can beat back milder forms of disease. For more severe depression, they can complement other approaches. When medication and therapy aren't enough, treating depression naturally through lifestyle can help push people toward full recovery.

"Fighting depression is a war that's waged day to day, not just over weeks and months while you wait for other treatments to take effect," says Dean F. MacKinnon, MD, associate professor of psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore.

So as bleak as things might seem, there are things that you can do, right now, that will help you feel better. Here's what you need to know about natural depression treatments.

Get in a Routine to Treat Depression Naturally

If you're depressed, or have been depressed, you need a routine. Depression can strip away the structure from your life, letting one day bleed into the next. That absence of order can also make your depression worse.

"It's extremely stressful to wake up in the morning and have no idea what you're going to do with the day," says MacKinnon.

Cook agrees. "Having a routine gives you a sense of control over the day," says Cook. "We know that helps, and we know that not having a sense of control makes people feel worse."

What should you build into your schedule to help fight depression naturally?

1. Exercise. Study after study has found that physical activity can boost mood, says Cook. How much? You don't need to run marathons to get a benefit. "It seems like half an hour several times a week may be enough," Cook says. "More than that may not have a further effect on mood. There seems to be a plateau."

The type of exercise you use as a natural depression treatment doesn't seem to matter. "Your cardiologist might want you getting a lot of aerobic exercise for your heart," says MacKinnon. "But for your mental health, just getting out and walking can be enough."

2. Diet. There is no depression diet, but there are great benefits to healthy eating. "I don't think there's any particular dietary regimen you need to follow," says MacKinnon. "A basic healthy eating plan should do."

Nutrition is an important element in your effort to help treat your depression, MacKinnon says. "Healing from depression is a physiological process, just like healing from a physical injury," he tells WebMD. He says that without good nutrition, medications for depression can't work as effectively.

There are some other things to keep in mind. Ask your doctor if your medication might cause weight gain. If so, you may want to take special care with your diet. If your depression is associated with an eating disorder -- like anorexia or binge eating -- you need to be working with an expert.

Get in a Routine to Treat Depression Naturally continued...

3. Sleep. While sleep problems are a symptom of depression, they can also make it worse. Some people with depression sleep excessively. Many more depressed people suffer from insomnia. Either way, you need to do something. Lying in bed and willing yourself to sleep won't work. But one natural depression treatment is to make your life more conducive

to getting a good sleep. Go to bed and get up at the same time every day. Try not to nap. Take all the distractions out of your bedroom -- no computer and no TV.

4. Goals. To help yourself during treatment for depression, it's important to meet goals that you set for yourself. The trick here is to come up with *realistic* goals -- ones that you can really accomplish in a day. Drafting a 20-page to do list is not going to help. If you're having trouble setting goals, Cook recommends working with a therapist, family member, or friend. Someone who can help you prioritize what's most important and break larger tasks into smaller, more manageable ones.

5. Responsibilities. When you're depressed, a natural inclination is to pull back -- to give up all your responsibilities at home and at work. It's a feeling you should fight against. Staying active and having daily responsibilities can work as a natural depression treatment. They help ground you and give you a sense of accomplishment. Obviously, don't push yourself too far. If you're not ready to go back to work or school, that's fine. Think about part-time. If that seems like too much, consider a little volunteer work.

"If you're volunteering to help clean up a playground, you're still doing something," says MacKinnon. "You're getting out of the house, and at the end of the day you know that you accomplished something."

6. Relaxation. Don't assume that fun or relaxing things will happen naturally. The only way to make them happen is to plan them.

Cognitive Ways to Cope With Depression Naturally

In your fight against depression, a lot of the work is mental -- changing how you think.

"When you're depressed, you become trained to see the world and yourself in a negative way," says MacKinnon. These patterns of thought can have a lasting impact. They can linger on months or years after you've resolved the biological cause of the depression, MacKinnon says.

Automatic negative thoughts are particular sources of trouble. These thoughts occur spontaneously when you encounter a situation and affect how you feel. They can link to one another in a chain, dragging you downward.

An example: Your boss asks you to rewrite the opening of a proposal you worked on. Rather than just doing it, you dwell on it. In your mind, this incident becomes symptomatic of deeper problems. You're incompetent. You're going to be fired. You'll be penniless. You'll lose your house. Your family will hate you. You're a complete screw-up. You don't deserve to live. In seconds, your good mood disappears and you're plunged into misery.

Cognitive Ways to Cope With Depression Naturally continued...

How can you battle automatic negative thinking?

7. Reflect. At first, it's very hard to catch yourself engaging in automatic thinking, says Cook. By definition, you're not completely aware that it's happening. Instead, Cook says it's often easier to look back on a bad day and figure out what happened in hindsight. How did you get from feeling pretty good in the morning to feeling horrible by noon? What events -- and what thoughts -- led you to such a depressive state of mind?

By reconstructing what happened, you learn how your mind works and what automatic thinking you're prone to. Then you can do something about it. "In time, you get a lot better at recognizing automatic thoughts in the moment," says Cook, "so you can stop them before they get out of control."

8. Take a break. When you find yourself engaging in automatic thinking, clear your head. Cook recommends breathing exercises or simply getting up and walking around. "Taking a break from whatever you're doing physically can create a break in the mental process," he tells WebMD.

9. Use logic. The next time some problem is making you feel terrible about yourself, try to use logic as a natural depression treatment. Depression can make you think bad things about yourself that are grotesquely exaggerated. "Try to impose some reason," says Cook. "Inject some reality." Is it really true that no one likes you? Is there real evidence for that? Sure, you might *feel* like the most stupid and hateful person on the planet, but really, what are the odds?

Other Natural Depression Treatments

In addition to getting in a routine and making cognitive changes, there are other natural depression treatments you should consider. Here's a rundown.

10. Reach out to friends and family. To get through a depression, you need the support of trusted family and friends. Talking about what you're going through can be a good natural depression treatment. Try to develop a network of supports. That way, you're not putting too much pressure on a single person.

A friend shouldn't only be a shoulder to cry on. Sometimes, you might want to set aside your feelings for a few hours. "Taking a break from thinking about your depression can be helpful," says Cook. "You can just try to enjoy being with that other person."

MacKinnon agrees. "If you were recovering from pneumonia, you wouldn't feel obligated to regale everyone with details about what you were coughing up," says MacKinnon. "It's OK not to talk to everybody about what you've been through with your depression."

11. Get support. In addition to relying on your friends and family, joining a support group can also be a good natural depression treatment. There, you'll meet people who really understand what you've been through – perhaps in a way that your family and friends can't.

Other Natural Depression Treatments continued...

12. Check with your doctor before using supplements. While lots of supplements have been promoted as depression cures, the research has been mixed. Always check with your doctor before starting any supplement, especially if you're already on other medications.

13. Watch out for substance abuse. Lots of people deal with depression by relying on alcohol and other substances. Don't. After a few hours, these substances only leave you feeling worse. If you think you have a substance abuse problem, don't wait until your depression is resolved to deal with it. Get help now.

14. Do something new. When you're depressed, you're in a rut. A typical day might be spent cycling between the bed, the television, and the computer. Cook recommends that people push themselves to do something different and new as a natural depression treatment. Go to a museum. Pick up a used book and read it on a park bench. Volunteer at a soup kitchen. Take a language class.

15. Don't ignore serious signs of depression. While using natural depression treatments on your own can help a lot, they have limits. "People are amazingly resourceful when it comes to helping themselves," says Cook. "But when they become so depressed that they can no longer function, or they're feeling like the world would be better without them, they need to get professional help."

Don't Forget: Make Time for Things You Enjoy

Experts agree: If you're depressed, you have to make time for things you enjoy. You have to relax. You have to do things that are fun.

This may be advice you've heard before. And there's a problem with this natural depression treatment. When you're depressed, or recovering from depression, having fun can seem impossible. Things that used to be fun don't feel fun anymore. So why bother?

It's a common problem, experts say. "One of the insidious aspects of depression is that it trains you to become hopeless about finding anything in life pleasurable," says MacKinnon.

But this is just another unhealthy thought pattern that depression instills in us. The key is to unlearn it. While we assume that having fun is supposed to be effortless, it isn't. You've gotten out of practice.

So as perverse as it might sound, you may have to work at having fun. Schedule things you used to enjoy. Even if it feels like a chore, keep going out with friends. Keep going to the movies and keep playing tennis.

"Sometimes, you really have to take a leap of faith and force yourself to do these things," says MacKinnon. The act of doing them is itself a form of rehab, he says. You're retraining yourself. In time, fun things really will feel fun again.

SOURCES:

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Dean F. MacKinnon, MD, associate professor, Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore.

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