

Depression: Tips for Coping

What is depression?

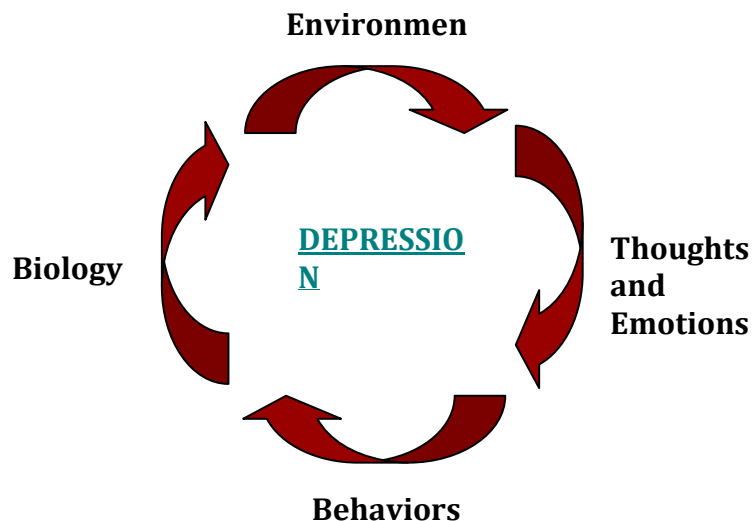
There are several forms of depression. Depression can develop rapidly or come on slowly over weeks or months. In some cases, depression can develop into a chronic or episodic syndrome. Although many people associate depression only with sadness, there are other signs as well (for example, dropping enjoyable activities; feeling tired; feeling guilty or worthless; having problems with concentration, sleep or appetite). It is estimated that up to 25% of women and 12% of men will experience clinical depression at some point during their lifetime. Women are twice as likely as men to become depressed.

What depression is not

There are a lot of myths and stigmas surrounding depression. Depression is not a “weakness;” nor is it “all in your head.” Clinical depression is not something that you can just “snap out of.” The good news is that help is available. Years of research have identified effective behavioral interventions for improving symptoms of depression. If you or someone you know is depressed, it’s very important that you seek help. Reading this pamphlet is a first step towards understanding depression and getting the help that you need.

What causes us to feel down?

Prolonged stress and major negative life events (e.g., the death of a loved one), and medical illness can all play a significant role in depression. Usually, depression is related to a combination of factors including the social environmental, biological factors, our thoughts and beliefs, our emotions, and our behavior. Each of these factors can affect the others, and often work together in a sort of “snowball effect” that may leads to more symptoms of depression. The depression spiral provides a helpful illustration of this:



It is important to keep in mind that ***what initially causes the depression may not be the same as what maintains it, or causes it to persist over time.*** For example, the loss of a loved one or a job may lead to feelings of loss and result in increased stresses, including loneliness, financial problems, etc. Symptoms of depression may worsen in response to growing stress levels, but it our experience of failure in solving the problems triggered by initial stresses that get us “in the dumps”. Often, we “pull back” from life and then forget to re-engage. We drop our previously enjoyable activities, see others less, and often move into more sedentary or inactive lifestyles.

How to cope with depression

The good news about the depression spiral is that it is reversible---there are specific behavior change strategies that you can use to improve your life, starting TODAY. These strategies have been shown to lead to significant and enduring improvement among hundreds of thousands of other people.

STEP ONE: GET MOVING!

Our level of activity is often connected to the way we feel. You may notice that when you are depressed, you tend to be less active—you may cut down on social activities or on exercise. As a first step towards treating depression, it is often beneficial to increase activities—particularly those that you have found pleasurable in the past, those that lead you to feel that you have accomplished something (i.e., hobbies), or those that are aligned with your values (i.e., if you are a parent, spending quality time with your children).

Aerobic exercise, in particular, is one of the best ways to improve your mood. When you exercise, your body releases endorphins, which are natural “feel good” chemicals. Research has shown that exercise is an effective treatment for depression.

When you’re depressed, you will rarely feel motivated or excited about initiating an activity...but you’ll find that once you get started, the positive momentum will build and over time (over several weeks of increasing your activity level), most people experience increased energy and an elevation in mood.

You will increase your chances of success if you plan, and schedule, specific activities (i.e., “tomorrow morning at 7am, I am going to walk my dog around the neighborhood for 30 minutes”). The activities you select don’t have to be extravagant- they can be as simple as a 10-minute walk outside, taking a bath, gardening, reading a book, talking to a close friend, or listening to soothing music. Remember- everybody is different- it’s important to identify activities that are enjoyable or meaningful to YOU! (Note: if you are having a difficult time identifying activities, your PCB can provide you with a list of hundreds of potentially enjoyable activities to “spur” your brainstorming process.)

Use the activity schedule on the last page of this pamphlet to schedule and track your activities for the next week. Tracking your activities can help you to see more clearly the relationship between them and your mood. Be sure to rate your level of enjoyment/mastery for each activity, and your average mood (using a 0-10 scale, with 0 representing “completely depressed” and 10 representing “not at all depressed”) for each day. After you’ve done this for one week, ask yourself the following questions:

- Did my activities affect my mood? How?
- Which activities helped me to feel better?
- Did any activities (or periods of inactivity) cause me to feel worse?
- Which activities had the greatest positive impact on my mood?
- Were there certain times of the day or week when I felt better or worse?
- Based on my answers to the previous questions, what activities can I plan in the coming weeks to maximize the chances that I will feel better?

Use the information you've gained to guide activity plans for the upcoming weeks. Becoming "un-depressed" is a little bit like walking out of a big hole in the ground. It won't happen all at once; rather, you'll have to climb out one step at a time. The important thing is to keep the momentum in the positive direction. Don't give up!!! If you need to, get your friends/family to help keep you on track with planning and committing to activities.

STEP TWO: LOOK OUT FOR "STINKIN' THINKIN'!"

Depression is characterized by thought patterns that actually maintain the depressed mood. Individuals who are depressed experience negative thoughts about the self (self-criticism), the world (general negativity) and the future (hopelessness). It's a little bit like wearing a pair of dark sunglasses—everything you see has a shadow cast over it. Our thoughts have a direct impact on our mood, on our interactions with others, and on our activity level (or lack thereof). It's very important, therefore, that you *pay attention to unhelpful thinking*.

Use intentional choice get you out the door and involved in meaningful and important life activities more often. It is possible to simply notice your "stinkin' thinkin'" and take it with you to the park or the library. It is possible to smile at a neighbor even if you are feeling discouraged and thinking painful thoughts. Choosing is difficult, and worth it. It can open "new doors" for you. For example, you might start a new friendship if the neighbor smiles back.

Whenever you experience a negative shift in mood, pay attention to what you were thinking at that moment. Pay attention to any thing that triggered it. Use an attitude of curious interest. Perhaps you can make a note of it on a piece of paper. Once you've identified your thoughts, ask yourself "is this type of thinking helping me or hurting me?" If you find that your thinking is making your depressed mood worse (as is usually the case for depressed individuals), here are some things you can do:

- **"Examine the evidence"** for and against the negative thought. Is it truly accurate? Where's the proof? Are you blaming yourself for something over which you do not have complete control? Are you jumping to conclusions? Are you discounting your strengths, or positive attributes, in some way? Become your own scientific investigator and collect the facts.
- **Explore the negative thought and look for other thoughts to appear (thoughts do "come and go")**. Ask yourself, five years from now, if you look back at this situation, how might you look at it differently? Allow yourself to view a situation from more than

one angle (how might your spouse, friend, or someone you admire view the same situation?)

- **Use the “best friend” scenario.** What would you tell your best friend if he or she was having these same thoughts? Would you criticize him or her as harshly as you criticize yourself?

Most of us go through life on “autopilot,” unaware of much of our thoughts or on the impact that they have on our mood and our behavior. It can take awhile before you get to be skilled at identifying and working with negative thoughts. Over time, you’ll get better at this.

Additional Resources (Self-help workbooks)

- “Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life” by Stephen Hayes, Ph.D.*
- “Living Life Well: New Strategies for Hard Times” by Patricia Robinson
- “The Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Depression” by Kirk Strosahl & Patricia Robinson*

*Winners of the ABCT Self-Help Book Merit Award