
Non-Drug Approaches to Help Move from Depression to Feeling Happier With More Energy

What is depression?

Depression is an illness that can interfere with a person's thoughts, feelings, behavior, and physical health. Everyone feels sad, "blue", or "down-in-the-dumps" at times. Depression is different. It can last for weeks, months, or years and greatly interfere with a person's life. It is the leading cause of disability in the U.S. from medical illness. If not treated, depression can lead to suicide. The good news is that most people can be successfully treated.

How do I know if I might be depressed?

You might have a condition known as major depression if you have several of the following symptoms at the same time, these symptoms are different from the way you usually feel, they last longer than two weeks, and they are interfering with your life. Some people have few symptoms; others have many. Symptoms might be worse for some people than others, but also the severity can change over time for each person.

- sad or irritable mood
- major changes in sleep, appetite, and energy
- difficulty thinking, concentrating, and remembering
- physical slowing or restlessness
- lack of interest in or pleasure from activities that were once enjoyed
- feelings of guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness, and emptiness
- recurrent thoughts of death or suicide
- physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and pain.

Are there different types of depression?

There are different types of depression just like there are different types of other illnesses. Three of the most common include:

- **Major depression**, which involves a combination of different symptoms that interfere with a person's daily life and last a long time. Someone may be diagnosed with mild, moderate, or severe major depression.
- **Dysthymia**, which is a less serious form of depression. The symptoms are not disabling but also last a long time and can keep a person from functioning well and/or from feeling well.
- **Bipolar disorder**, which is also called manic-depressive illness. It is not as common as the other forms of depression. In this disorder, a person's mood can shift from depressed to manic. In the manic cycle, the person might be extremely active, sleep little, talk too much and too fast, and do things that can cause problems such as spending too much money.

How is depression diagnosed?

Depression can be diagnosed by a primary care or mental health practitioner such as a psychologist or clinical social worker. It is a good idea to see your primary care practitioner early on. Some medical conditions and medications can cause the same symptoms as depression. Through a physical exam, patient interview, and diagnostic tests, the primary care practitioner can determine if something other than depression might be causing the symptoms.

If other explanations are ruled out, a good work-up will include a thorough history of the symptoms, e.g., when they started, how long



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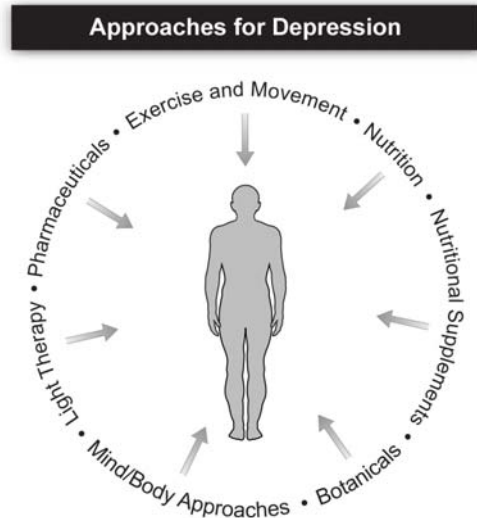
they have lasted, how severe they are, whether you have had them before and, if so, whether the symptoms were treated, and what treatment was given. The practitioner should also ask about your alcohol and drug use, whether you have thoughts about suicide and death, and if other family members have had depression. The practitioner will also ask questions to determine if your speech, memory, or the way you think have been affected by the disease.

Is grief the same as depression?

Grief over the death of a loved one or over another loss in your life (such as the loss of a job) can cause many of the same symptoms as depression. However grief and depression are not the same. A major loss can contribute to depression, but most people who are grieving will not need treatment for depression. It often takes longer than people expect to feel like themselves again after a loss. Almost all communities have resources such as counselors or support groups to help people who are grieving, and there are many books that can be helpful.

What causes depression?

Depression has many causes. The illness can run in families. Some diseases or medications may trigger depression. Life changes or long-term stress or the way a person thinks about or copes with this stress can lead to depression. Many factors might combine together to cause a person's depression. For example, a person's personality and family history along with a specific situation and the way the person has learned to cope with the situation can all play a role. It is not always clear what has caused depression for a particular person. Sometimes there is no known reason. No matter what the cause, chemical changes or imbalances occur in the brain when someone is depressed. This means that depression is an illness.



A number of approaches can help foster well-being in those with depression.

How is depression treated?

Fortunately almost all people can be successfully treated for this disease. It is important to work with a health care practitioner, so that you receive the treatment that is right for you. There are different types of treatments and a variety of approaches within these types. For example, there are many kinds of prescription drugs used to treat depression. There are also different kinds of non-drug treatments. If one approach does not work, there are others to try.

Treatment will be determined in part by the level of depression (mild, moderate, or severe). Some people will do well with counseling and lifestyle changes; others will be prescribed antidepressant medication. A combination of approaches may be used. If depression is severe and other treatments do not work or work too slowly to relieve suicidal thoughts, electroconvulsive therapy (which uses electricity to induce a brief seizure) may be used.



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What approaches can be used to help treat depression other than medication?

This handout will give you some information on how depression can be treated without using drugs. It is meant for people 1) who cannot take antidepressant medication because of side effects or other health concerns, or 2) who want to treat their depression without prescription medications, or 3) who want to use non-drug treatments along with prescribed medication. Used alone, these non-drug approaches may not be adequate for a person with depression that is severe. It is important for you to talk with your primary care or mental health practitioner for help in determining what is best for you.

What types of non-drug treatments can be used for depression?

There are a number of non-drug treatments that can help treat depression. They include: exercise and movement, nutrition, nutritional supplements, botanicals, mind/body approaches, light therapy, and aromatherapy.

Does exercise or movement help depression?

Over 1000 research projects have studied exercise and depression. These studies found that exercise helps people with depression as much as prescription medications do. Also there are no side effects with exercise. Both aerobic exercise (exercise that increases the heart rate for a period of time, thereby increasing the amount of oxygen-rich blood to the muscles) or anaerobic exercise (such as lifting weights) can be helpful.

- If you have not been exercising, start slowly and gradually increase as you are able.
- Find an exercise that you enjoy and that you will do over time. It helps to try different types of exercise (walking, water aerobics, biking, swimming, dancing, tennis, etc.) Also pick some exercises that you can do indoors when the weather is bad. Use a “perceived exertion scale” to gauge how hard to exercise. On a scale of 1-20, with 20 being exercising to the point of exhaustion, shoot for a level of 14. At this stage, you should be able to talk but not sing. Exercise for 25-40 minutes 3-4 times a week and work up to a “14” each time.
- Participating in a group exercise with others may help you feel even better.
- It is a good idea to continue to exercise after you are feeling better; this can help prevent a relapse. Exercise does this better than medications do.

How can depression be treated with nutrition?

The food people eat can affect their mood and behavior. There is some evidence that eating more sugar may be related to major depression. Also, when people are stressed, they tend to crave carbohydrates, leading to weight gain. Caffeine intake also tends to increase with depression; this might be because people who are depressed try to counteract the illness with caffeine. A problem with this is that too much caffeine can affect the nervous system and lead to fatigue and sleep problems.



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- Try to eat a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and omega 3 essential fatty acids found in cold-water fish (such as salmon, mackerel, sardines, and herring), walnuts, flax seed, and green leafy vegetables. ([See Anti-Inflammatory Diet handout](#))
- Limit your intake of sweets and foods prepared with white flour (such as pastries, white bread, and bagels).
- Drink no more than two 8-ounce beverages containing caffeine each day.

What nutritional supplements can help depression?

Several nutritional supplements may be helpful for depression: Omega-3 fatty acids, B vitamins, S-adenosyl-L-methionine (SAME), and L-tryptophan (Hydroxytryptophan--5-HTP).

Omega-3 fatty acids

Omega-3 fatty acids may help prescription medication for depression work even better. Taking fish oil capsules is one easy way to get omega-3 fatty acids into the body.

- The dose used most often in studies is 3 gms of fish oil daily.
- Freezing the fish oil capsules and taking them at night helps reduce the side effect of belching a fishy taste.
- Fish oil capsules can spoil. If you are belching a foul fishy taste a lot, try changing brands or buying fresh fish oil.
- Most fish oil supplements have a 3:2 ratio of EPA to DHA essential fatty acids. Research suggests that products with a higher ratio of EPA to DHA may be more helpful. Companies that produce brands that have a 7:1 ratio of EPA to DHA include: Omegabrite (omegabrite.com), NOW (*Super EPA*) and Nordicnaturals (*EPA Xtra*).

B vitamins

The body needs B vitamins to make serotonin, a hormone that helps the body stay in good working order. This includes regulating mood. Serotonin levels may be too low in individuals with poor nutrition, those who abuse alcohol, or elderly people with a condition called atrophic gastritis, which is an inflammation of the stomach. Some medications (such as birth control pills or those used to reduce acid in the digestive system) can also lower the serotonin level.

Depression is the most common symptom when a person does not have enough folate (a B vitamin) in the body. Research has found that taking folate along with a type of antidepressant (SSRI) may increase the medication's effect.

- Consider taking a B-100 complex vitamin. (This has about 100 mg or ug of the B-vitamins).
- If you take a prescription medication for depression and it does not seem to be working as well as you had hoped, try also taking 1 mg of folic acid with it.

S-adenosyl-L-methionine (SAME)

SAME plays a role in more than 100 different processes in the body. If someone does not have enough Vitamin B₁₂ or folate, they will have less SAME in their central nervous system, which can cause a depressed mood. One research study found SAME to help as much as the antidepressant, Imiprimine, with fewer side effects.



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- The usual dose of SAME is 400 – 1600 mg a day. Most studies used 1600 mg. It is usually divided and taken twice a day.
- Start at a low dose (200 mg twice a day) and take more each week up to 800 mg twice a day or until you feel better.
- Use products that are packaged in blister packs. It can become inactive if left open to oxygen. (Nature's Made is one brand that packages in blister packs).
- SAME can have side effects such as anxiety, inability to sleep, and excessive happiness. Don't take it before bedtime. Do not take SAME if you have bipolar disease since it can cause mania.

L-tryptophan (Hydroxytryptophan--5-HTP)

The supplement, L-tryptophan, is converted in the body to 5-HTP. 5-HTP increases serotonin levels. Taking 5-HTP seems to improve symptoms of depression even for people whose disease has not been helped with other treatments. Research suggests that 5-HTP might be as helpful as Fluvoxamine (Luvox) and Imipramine (Tofranil), two drugs often used to treat depression.

This supplement was initially taken off the market because some people developed eosinophilia myalgia syndrome (EMS), an incurable flu-like condition which can sometimes be harmful. The problem was traced back to contamination in one company that makes the product. This problem has been resolved and the product is again available over the counter.

- Research looks promising for 5-HTP, but the safety of this supplement is still under question, and other treatments should be tried first.
- The dose is 150-300 mg each day.

What botanicals can help depression?

Botanicals are treatments made from plants. Research has shown that the herb, St. John's Wort, can be helpful for depression in the mild to moderate range.

- Studies have used St. John's Wort extract with 0.3% hypericin content. The usual starting dose is 300 mg three times daily. The dosage can be gradually increased up to 1200 mg /day if needed.
- It is important to tell your health care practitioner if you want to try St. John's Wort. It can interfere with other medications, so that they are not as effective. Be especially careful if you take more than one medication, birth control pills, anti-retrovirals (drugs used to treat viruses such as HIV), or antibiotics (drugs used to treat infections).
- St. John's Wort can cause the skin to be more sensitive to the sun. Avoid being in the sun for long periods of time and use sunblock.

What are mind/body approaches and how can they be helpful?

Mind/body approaches make use of the connection between a person's physical health and her/his mind or spirit. As you are learning from this handout, there are many ways to treat depression. An advantage of mind/body approaches is that for some causes of depression a person may learn skills to help prevent a recurrence.



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Psychotherapy (counseling)

Research has shown that counseling by experienced therapists can be as effective as prescription medications for depression but might take longer to work. Therapists use many different methods of psychotherapy. Two short-term types that have been especially helpful for depression include cognitive therapy (or cognitive behavior therapy) and interpersonal therapy.

Cognitive therapy helps individuals hear the negative or distorted (inaccurate) thoughts they have and learn to replace these thoughts with positive or more accurate ones. This helps individuals see things through more realistic eyes.

Interpersonal therapy focuses on the relationships in a person's life and communication patterns with others. It helps a person learn how current relationships might cause or maintain symptoms. The goal is to rapidly reduce symptoms. Frequently, more satisfying relationships result from therapy.

Psychotherapy also honors the healing effects that occur through human relationships. The ability of clinicians to develop rapport and trust may trump the benefits seen with medications. In a study of psychiatrists' effects on depression, it was found that "good" therapists (those able to foster relationships of trust) were more effective at treating depression with placebo than "poor" therapists were with an active drug (Imipramine).

- Counseling can be as effective as prescription medication. It may take longer to work.
- When locating a therapist, ask what approach is used and ask for an explanation of that approach. Choose a type of therapy that feels right for you. Two to consider are cognitive therapy and interpersonal therapy.
- Work with a counselor whom you feel good about.

Positive psychology

Positive psychology is a rather new field of psychology. Its goal is to improve life for people by strengthening what is positive in their lives. This is in contrast to traditional psychology which focuses on relieving negative conditions in a person's life. Positive psychology focuses on the strengths people have, what provides meaning in their lives, and helping them develop well-being. You may benefit from working with psychotherapists, life coaches, and medical professionals who are using new approaches resulting from research in this new field.

Learning from emotions

For some causes of depression, a person can learn from the emotion. In the Buddhist tradition, depression may be considered as suffering. The experience of suffering is seen as a great teacher because once the individual realizes why he/she is suffering, he/she learns why symptoms are present and can learn to abandon its cause. The process may draw a person's attention to an emotion that he/she didn't know was there. This can lead to an understanding of why it is there and what is needed to overcome it. This process of recognizing suffering, understanding why it is present and abandoning its cause can result in more happiness. This process also can help the individual learn from the symptoms to prevent a recurrence.



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Tools to help bring awareness to emotions:

- Feelings-Images-Talk (F.I.T.) Practice
This is something you can practice on your own each time you feel a negative emotion. Exploring the following questions can help you better understand the emotion you are feeling.
 - Feelings: What feelings are you experiencing?
 - Images: What pictures come to mind with this emotion?
 - Talk: What are you saying to yourself?
- Journaling
 - Write about a time that has been stressful or traumatic.
 - [See handout on Using Journaling to Aid Health.](#)
- Forgiveness
 - Learn the power of forgiveness.
 - [See Handout on Healing Through Forgiveness](#)
- Psychotherapy/Counseling (See above)
- Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Programs
 - The Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School keeps a list of MBSR programs across the country. You can access it at the following website: www.umassmed.edu/cfm/mbsr/ .
 - Patients can also call clinics and hospitals in their area for possible classes.

Positive affirmations

Practice thinking positive thoughts.

Two Eastern techniques that have been found to be helpful include:

- Loving Kindness Meditation – This meditation practice has been around for over 2,500 years and should first be directed towards oneself and then towards an individual or process that is causing stress, anger or difficulties.
 - [See handout on Loving Kindness Meditation](#)
- Tonglen is a Tibetan word that means “sending and taking.” This practice involves breathing in a negative emotion, image or process and changing it within oneself to a positive one. Imagine that you are your liver and your job is to remove the poison from a negative emotion. The negative emotion is breathed in, then changed to a positive emotion, which is breathed out.

Resources for Tonglen include:

- Tonglen taught by Pema Chodron, a Buddhist teacher.
<http://www.shambhala.org/teachers/pema/tonglen1.php>
- Three practices of Tonglen from a spiritual care hospice web site:
<http://www.spcare.org/practices/tonglen-practices.html>



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How can light therapy help?

Ultraviolet light helps the body make hormones to stay healthy. Light therapy is a common treatment for people with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), a form of depression that tends to occur in winter when there is less natural light. Research has shown that light therapy may be helpful for other forms of depression also. A meta-analysis (research that looks at the results of many studies) suggests that light therapy helps short-term, but more studies are needed to prove long-term benefit.

Using a light box for at least 20 minutes twice daily may be very helpful. You can buy a light box to use in your own home. Some dependable websites that offer light boxes include: www.lighttherapyproducts.com, www.lightforhealth.com, and www.alaskanorthernlights.com.

- Start using the light box with a dose from 2,500-10,000 lux of light for 20 minutes, twice a day (morning and early afternoon).
- You can work up to 60 minutes two to three times/day.
- Using the light box in the morning helps the most.
- Sit within three feet of the light box. Do not look straight into the light
- On a sunny day, try to spend time outdoors.

How can aromatherapy help?

Aromatherapy uses essential oils to affect mood and promote health. An essential oil is one that has the odor or flavor of the plant from which it comes. These oils may be used in massage or inhaled as vapors. Some research is promising, but so far there is no proof that aromatherapy helps depression. Use caution since some oils (such as camphor) can be harmful.

- The following may be helpful for depression and are generally safe if used three times/day: lavender, citrus, rose, and chamomile.
- One small study found citrus helpful for men with depression.
- Lavender may be more helpful for insomnia (difficulty sleeping) which often occurs along with depression.
- To locate someone knowledgeable about aromatherapy, see if your clinic has a list of holistic practitioners or look at listings for “alternative medicine” or “holistic practitioners” in the yellow pages of your phone directory.



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The information in this handout is for general education. It is not meant to be used by a patient alone. Please work with your health care practitioner to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.

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