

Depression: The Road to Recovery

The catch-22 of 'depression recovery' is that the things that help the most are also the things that are most difficult to do. Recovery requires action, but taking action when you are depressed is hard.

Often just thinking about the things that you should do to feel better, like taking a walk or spending time with friends is exhausting. Depression drains your energy, and motivation, making it difficult to do what you need to feel better.

Overcoming depression isn't quick or easy, but it's far from impossible even though it can't be beaten through willpower alone. The key is to start small. Feeling better takes time, but you can get there if you make positive choices for yourself each day.

A person needs to find new ways to manage, and live with, the changes and challenges of having depression.

- Start with a few small goals and stay focussed on building slowly, taking one day at a time.
- 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.
- Remember to reward yourself for each goal achieved - the steps may seem small, but they'll quickly add up. For all the energy you put into your recovery, you'll get back much more in return.

Here are some practical tips that can help you start on the journey to recovery:

Cultivate supportive relationships

Getting the support helps in lifting the fog of depression and keeping it away. It can be difficult to maintain perspective and sustain the effort required to beat depression on your own, and the nature of depression makes it difficult to reach out for help.

Sometimes even the thought of reaching out to family members and friends can seem overwhelming. You may feel ashamed, too exhausted to talk, or guilty for neglecting the relationship. Remind yourself that this is the depression talking. Reaching out is not a sign of weakness and it won't mean you're a burden to others. Your loved ones care about you and want to help.

Turn to a trusted friend and/or family member. Share what you're going through with the people you love and trust, face to face if possible. The people you talk to don't have to be able to fix you; they just need to be good listeners. Ask for the help and support you need. You may have retreated from your most treasured relationships, but they can get you through this tough time.

Remember that isolation and loneliness make depression even worse, so maintaining your close relationships and social activities are vital to increasing your wellbeing.

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.

10 tips for reaching out and building relationships:

- Talk to one person about your feelings
- Help someone else by volunteering
- Have lunch or coffee with a friend
- Ask a loved one to check in with you regularly
- Accompany someone to the movies, a concert, or a small get-together
- Call or email an old friend
- Go for a walk with a workout buddy
- Schedule a weekly dinner date
- Meet new people by taking a class or joining a club
- Talk to a counsellor, psychologist, or doctor.

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Challenge negative thinking

Depression puts a negative spin on everything, including how you see yourself, the situations you encounter and how you see the future. Be aware that you can't just break out of this mindset by 'being positive'. Happy thoughts or wishful thinking won't cut it, try to replace negative thoughts with more balanced thoughts will help.

4 ways to challenge negative thinking:

Think outside yourself. Ask yourself if you'd say what you're thinking about yourself to someone else. If not, stop being so hard on yourself.

Allow yourself to be less than perfect. Many depressed people are perfectionists, holding themselves to impossibly high standards and then beating themselves up when they fail to meet them. Embrace your imperfection – this is what makes you human.

Socialise with positive people. Notice how people who always look on the bright side deal with challenges... big or small. Even if you have to pretend, try to adopt their optimism and persistence in the face of difficulty.

Keep a 'negative thought log.' Whenever you experience a negative thought, jot down the thought and what triggered it in a notebook. Review your log when you're in a good mood. Consider if the negativity was truly warranted.

Types of negative thinking traps

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.")

Overgeneralisation – 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.

Labelling – Labelling yourself based on mistakes and perceived shortcomings ("I'm a failure; an idiot; a loser.")

Take care of yourself

In order to overcome depression, you have to take care of yourself. This includes following a healthy lifestyle, learning to manage stress, setting limits on what you're able to do, adopting healthy habits, and scheduling fun activities into your day.

Sleep well - Aim for eight hours of sleep. Depression typically involves sleep problems. Whether you're sleeping too little or too much, your mood suffers.

Soak up some sun - Expose yourself to a little sunlight every day. Lack of sunlight can make depression worse. Make sure you're getting enough - aim for at least 15 minutes of sunlight a day to boost your mood.

Stress less. This is one that is harder than it sounds... Not only does stress prolong and worsen depression, but it can also trigger it. Identify the things in your life that stress you out and once you've identified your stressors, you can make a plan to avoid them or minimize their impact.

Practice relaxation techniques. A daily relaxation practice 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.

Push yourself – just a little. 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. While you can't force yourself to have fun or experience pleasure, you can choose to do things that you used to enjoy. Don't expect your depression to lift immediately, but as you do the things you enjoy, you'll gradually feel more upbeat and energetic.

Develop a wellness toolbox.

Create a list of things that you can do for a quick mood boost. Include any strategies, activities, or skills that have helped in the past. Try and implement a few of these ideas each day, even if you're feeling good.

Get regular exercise.

When you're depressed, exercising may be the last thing you feel like doing. But exercise is a powerful tool for dealing with depression. Studies show that regular exercise can be as effective as antidepressant medication at increasing energy levels and decreasing feelings of fatigue.

References:

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