

## depression

### identification

Changes in mood are a normal part of the human condition. However, when feelings of sadness or other symptoms of depression are severe, continue for prolonged periods of time, or significantly affect our daily functioning, we may be suffering from depression. Symptoms of depression can vary a lot from person to person; however, some of the most common symptoms of depression include:

- Sadness
- Sleep disturbance
- Change in appetite
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Difficulties concentrating
- Memory problems
- Decreased sexual interest
- Social withdrawal
- Fatigue
- Excessive worry
- Self-criticism
- Lack of interest in everyday activities
- Suicidal thoughts

Remember that depressive feelings and symptoms are on a continuum, and treatment is going to be most successful if it is tailored to your individual situation.

### coping strategies

There are many potential ways of coping with depression and for reducing depressive symptoms. Here are 25 of the most common and successful strategies.

#### 1 identify your early warning signs

Since everyone with depression experiences some symptoms, these symptoms may serve as an early warning system that you may be sliding into a depressive episode. If you can learn to identify the first signs of a decline, then you can catch your depression and apply coping strategies while you still have the energy to do so. It is much easier to stop your depression early in the cycle rather than later. Some of these possible warning signs include: apathy, low energy, avoiding people, difficulty getting out of bed, being easily frustrated, increased drinking, poor appetite, crying easily, or feeling emotionally numb or irritable.

#### 2 reduce your overall stress levels

High levels of stress often feed into the depressive cycle, so anything that can reduce your stress levels or improve your coping strategies will help with depression. Please refer to our website for the handout on Stress Management Strategies for some helpful stress management ideas.

#### 3 maintain a routine

As depression develops and our energy levels go down, it is not uncommon for people to start giving up a lot of daily activities, and sometimes even the most basic self-care, such as regularly eating, sleeping, and exercising. Unfortunately, as we let go of our routines, the cycle of depression can become even deeper. To pull yourself out of the cycle, try to re-establish daily routines that have some rewarding activities with the potential of providing you with some positive feelings as well as structure to your day.

#### 4 challenge your negative thinking

One frequent aspect of depression is a great deal of negative thinking, which needs to be changed in order to feel better. Examples of some common negative thoughts include:

- I'm a failure.
- There is no hope for the future.
- I never do anything right.

- Everyone is against me.
- Life will never get better.
- I've disappointed everyone.
- I feel hopeless about the future.
- Every time I try it ends up the same way.
- I don't enjoy anything anymore.
- No one is interested in getting to know me.
- We're all going to die anyway, what's the point?
- I don't think anyone understands me.
- It's better to stay in bed all day.
- No one will ever love me.

Identify your own negative thinking by keeping a log of these thoughts. Once identified, begin to look for evidence of the truth of these statements. We know that when we are depressed, much of our thinking is distorted and needs to be more accurate.

## 5 develop realistic and positive self-talk

After looking at evidence for or against our negative self-talk, the next step is to develop a new set of more rational self-statements that support a more hopeful future. Try to engage in this process when you are not at the height of your depression or you may have difficulty identifying these healthier thoughts. Once these statements are developed, you may also decide to write and post them to use as daily affirmations. These positive self-statements might include the following comebacks for each of the negative self-statements listed earlier.

- Although I've failed at some things, like everyone else has, this does not make me a failure.
- Life can and will change if I keep up hope and develop a plan for more fulfillment.
- I can do many things well and no one is perfect.
- I may feel alienated at times, but I do have support.
- Life is always changing and this time I can make it better.
- I can't get everyone's approval and don't need it. I only really need to accept myself.
- I've had hope before and I can find it again.
- The only way I'll fail is if I give up trying.
- I need to rediscover what I enjoy in life.
- People will like me if I give them a chance to get to know me.
- I can make this the best life it can be.
- I can help people understand my suffering if I'm honest about my feelings.
- Staying in bed will only make me feel worse in the long term.
- I can get the love I want, if I keep putting myself out there.

## 6 identify your self-defeating beliefs

Just as we often tell ourselves many unhelpful and often false ideas when we are depressed, we also can hold a number of self-defeating core beliefs that make us more prone to depression. Some of these beliefs, as outlined by Burns (2003), include:

- I must never fail or make a mistake.
- People won't love me if I'm flawed or vulnerable.
- My worth as a human being depends on my achievements, intelligence, talent, status, income, or looks.
- I need everyone's approval to be worthwhile.
- I can't feel happy and fulfilled without being loved.
- If you reject me, it proves there's something wrong with me.
- I should always try to please you, even if I make myself miserable in the process.
- People who love each other should never fight or argue.
- The problems in the relationship are bound to be my fault.

Try to determine if you hold these beliefs and what impact they are having on your life and your choices, then begin to challenge both their accuracy and their usefulness. Behaving in ways that are contrary to these beliefs will then further challenge them with some new experiences and outcomes.

## 7 set realistic goals

Goal-setting can be a powerful process to give us a sense of meaning or purpose in life, since depression often makes us feel hopeless and purposeless. Goals that are specific, measurable, significant, achievable, written, shared, and have a time frame are most helpful in redirecting our life in a more positive direction. Remember, if we are very depressed, these goals may have to start out very small and simple. Since success breeds success, we do not want to set ourselves up for failure by setting unrealistic goals.

## 8 maintain a healthy sleep cycle

Sleeping too much or too little will adversely influence our mood. When people are very depressed, they can feel like they can't get out of bed and can sleep 12 to 14 hours per day. However, to get back on track, it is important to try and regulate the sleep cycle, which includes not sleeping during the day. Sleeping during the day will continue to disrupt our sleep cycles and keep us in a never-ending self-defeating pattern.

## **9 return to activities you have previously**

Since depression can steal our energy, we can often stop doing the very things that can help us out of the depressive cycle. Therefore, initially you may have to take the little bit of energy you have and push yourself to do some activities you previously enjoyed or some new activities that you have always wanted to try. The first couple of times you do them, you may derive limited pleasure from these activities: but keep trying. Over time, the rewards will begin to come back and the cycle of depression will begin to be shifted positively.

## **10 exercise on a daily basis**

Exercise can have a powerful positive impact on our overall mood, in part, because exercise causes the release of endorphins into the blood stream. Everyone has likely heard of a “runner’s high,” which demonstrates the impact of endorphins on our body and mind. Such exercise should be vigorous in nature to have the most impact, but even low levels of activity like a short walk or a bit of cycling can be helpful.

## **11 rebuild or expand your social network**

Since one of the symptoms of depression is social withdrawal, one of the most important ways of overcoming depression is to make attempts to reconnect with friends, family, co-workers, and others. However, when we feel depressed, we often don’t feel like being social. This is another case where we have to change our behavior, even though we don’t feel like doing so in the beginning. Over time, by re-engaging socially we will usually experience the gratification that comes with this connection.

## **12 try to live one day at a time (living mindfully)**

A big part of depression relates to worries about the future or regrets about the past, and we lose the potential joy of the moment. By taking on a “one day at a time” or “one moment at a time” attitude, we are in a much better position to control our day and our mood. Focus on how you can make this day the best day you can, by building in events or activities that can bring a sense of happiness or meaning. Enjoying the simple things in a mindful way could be part of this process.

## **13 maintain a healthy diet**

When we are depressed, we can have the tendency to eat too little or (more typically) too much. However, because our mind and body are so interconnected, a healthy body is required to have a healthy mind. Consult with a dietician at the University Health Centre if you are unsure what a healthy and balanced diet would look like. Missing the basic food groups or essential nutrients will not help you cope with depression or deal with the biological basis for it.

## **14 learn some relaxation skills**

Since depression can be very much related to feeling overwhelmed in your attempts to deal with stress, anything that can help to reduce stress physiologically will also likely have a positive impact on your depression. There are a number of psychologically-based relaxation techniques that can be learned in working with a psychologist or online. These strategies include diaphragmatic breathing, passive muscle relaxation, progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, imagery training, and mindfulness. Learning meditation or yoga through community programming can also teach some similar skills.

## **15 keep a journal of your thoughts and feelings**

Journaling has long been considered a helpful way of processing feelings and dealing more effectively with emotional issues. There is something about getting out your thoughts and feelings by writing them on paper that brings greater clarity, and it can be somewhat cathartic. Not having to hold in these thoughts and feelings can be particularly helpful for dealing with depression, since our thoughts and feelings can be so negative.

## **16 limit your alcohol consumption**

Alcohol has often been used as a means of coping with life stress and unhappiness. Unfortunately, any short term relief alcohol use provides is overshadowed by the long-term impact, which is much more unhelpful. Alcohol is, after all, a depressant of the central nervous system, and over time it will negatively affect our mood and physiological functioning. Secondly, alcohol impairs our ability to make good decisions and because it disinhibits us, can lead to poor choices such as unprotected sex, drug use, and failure to attend classes, which all feed negatively into a depressive state. There is also the impact on academic performance in terms of trying to retain information after significant indulgence and a hang-over.

## 17 get in touch with your spirituality

Religious or spiritual beliefs have long been considered an antidote to feelings of loss of meaning and purpose in life, which can be highly relevant to why some people experience depression. If you are feeling lost and hopeless, a spiritual belief system can provide a framework for dealing more effectively with suffering. Having a belief that there is life after death can also alleviate a lot of existential fear which can provide a great sense of comfort. Spirituality can give people the strength to get through the many obstacles life eventually throws our way. Obviously, this perspective may not be for everyone, but for many people, it can positively impact depressive feelings.

## 18 get a pet

A pet can have an amazing impact on a person's sense of wellbeing, sometimes even more impactful than a human connection. Pets, unlike human connections at times, can provide the unconditional acceptance that we all so much want and need. Feeling unloved and unaccepted can often be part of depression and anything that can provide these positive feelings can be impactful on our mood. Just be careful not to take this too far and rely on this connection with pets as a replacement for human connection, since we still have to meet our social needs, and only human contact can give us this.

## 19 bring some laughter into your life

The old saying that "Laughter is the best medicine" has some truth in it. Laughter and depression have a hard time co-existing and we can be deliberate in trying to create it. You can go out of your way to read humorous books, watch comedies on T.V. or in movies, look for the humorous side of life situations, and find the funny side of our humanity.

## 20 stop procrastinating

Procrastination as a student is a recipe for stress and ultimately depression. Procrastination leads to feelings of being overwhelmed and can make us feel hopeless about the future. Overcoming procrastination, of course, is not an easy task, because it can be a well ingrained habit. Despite this, there are many strategies to beat your procrastination and please refer to the Procrastination handout on our website for some of these ideas.

## 21 volunteer

The idea of volunteering when you're depressed may seem ridiculous, but it may be the very thing to build your self-esteem and give you some positive, fulfilling experiences. There are many opportunities for volunteering on campus

including: Safe Walk, the Sexual Assault Centre, the Campus Food Bank, the Peer Support Centre, and the Distress Line, to mention a few. Volunteering has a way of taking us out of our own issues by positively contributing to someone else's life. You will only know if it will help by giving it a try and if it doesn't help, you can always opt out.

## 22 use full spectrum lighting

If your depression seems to be seasonal in nature or you have been specifically diagnosed with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), then full spectrum lighting may be helpful to you. There is mounting research evidence that daily light therapy can have significant positive benefits for SAD. Again, this is a case where you won't know if it is helpful unless you try it. You can purchase a relatively cheap full spectrum light at a number of drug stores in the area.

## 23 contact the distress line (ph: 780-482-4357)

If you are feeling significantly depressed and/or are suicidal, one very helpful option is to phone the 24 Hour Distress Line. This option is particularly helpful if you have no one else to talk to, or feel like you might be judged by your friends or family if you are open about your depression. Distress line workers are objective and supportive and can help you get through the tough times when no one else is available to talk to. This service is not a replacement for counselling, but is confidential and free.

## 24 get counselling

One of the key ways of dealing with depression is through counselling, either individual or in a group. There are often a number of issues that are contributing to depressive feelings, and counselling can focus on these issues and help you develop specific strategies and a therapeutic process to alleviate them. The therapeutic process has a lot of power to facilitate positive change, depending upon how much energy you are willing to put into the process. If you feel that the above self-help strategies are not enough to effectively deal with your depression, then giving counselling a try would be very appropriate. Come in to UHC-Student Counselling Services for an initial consultation and determine which services would be most helpful to you. We have a number of different groups that may be helpful, including a couple focusing specifically on improving your happiness. There are also a number of community counselling agencies that can provide support and treatment.

## 25 medication

Anti-depressant medications can be extremely helpful for depression, particularly if you are experiencing some of the more physiological symptoms (i.e., insomnia, lack of appetite, decreased sexual interest, fatigue, etc.) of depression. This can be a difficult decision for most people, however, because we often want to solve our problems on our own and don't want to rely on a medication to feel good. Whether to use an anti-depressant is, therefore, very much a personal choice so never let anyone (even a physician) push you to make this choice if you truly aren't comfortable. On the other hand, sometimes we can't get out of depression without this neuro-chemical boost, and we still need to address the issues causing our depression on a psychological level. Research indicates that medication and counselling together have the best chance of success. You will also have to see, through trial and error, whether the medication is truly helpful and whether you can manage any potential side effects. Today, anti-depressants are quite safe, but any medication can have some side effects, particularly in the short run, which are impossible to predict ahead of time.

\* Created by U of A Counselling and Clinical Services. For additional resources, visit: [uofa.ualberta.ca/current-students/wellness/mentalhealth](https://uofa.ualberta.ca/current-students/wellness/mentalhealth)

