

## Take Control of Depression



Each day, many people struggle with the persistent low mood and other symptoms that typify depression. But there is good news. With the right treatment, support, and self-care a person can recover from depression and take control back of their life.

This guide is intended to provide information to help a person along that path—the path of best care.

## What is Depression?

Everyone feels sad from time to time—it's a normal part of navigating the challenges and disappointments of everyday life. Sometimes it's a reaction to the breakup of a relationship, a problem at work, or a change in health. These feelings are very common.

But depression is more than a low mood. Depression can affect a person's thinking, relationships, ability to carry out family and work responsibilities, and health. It can interfere with the enjoyment of activities, and it can cause a person to become isolated and inactive.

To make matters worse, ignoring depression may make these problems work together to worsen mood and deplete energy further. Isolation can make a person feel alone and unsupported, low energy and feelings of worthlessness can cause the neglect of basic self-care, and avoiding responsibilities may increase feelings of hopelessness and despair.

Health professionals view the cause and treatment of depression from two perspectives: medical and psychological. Taken together, these explanations give a good picture of where depression comes from and the most suitable way to treat it.

**Medical explanations of depression** focus on changes in the brain chemistry that help determine thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. If the brain's chemical messengers get out of balance, depression may result. Most antidepressant medications work by correcting this balance of chemical messengers, resulting in improved mood and healthier physical functioning.

**Psychological explanations of depression** focus on negative thinking, stressful life events, and a lack of healthy and supportive relationships as both cause and effect of depression. Depression can arise from unrealistic and negative thinking (about oneself, the future, and the ability to deal with life's challenges) combined with stressful life situations that seem overwhelming and hopeless to change (e.g., chronic pain, competing work and family responsibilities, grief).

## Symptoms of Depression

Having any of the following symptoms continuously for more than two weeks would warrant seeking medical assistance or advice, such as talking to a health care provider (e.g., family doctor). No single symptom is diagnostic of depression but all of these symptoms should be taken seriously and all can be treated.



- Feeling sad, discouraged, worthless, empty, hopeless or numb (no feeling)
- Loss of pleasure from activities that are normally enjoyable
- Guilty feelings
- Agitation
- Slowness/sluggishness
- Inability to make decisions, trouble concentrating
- Daily activities are enormously effortful to do (e.g., taking care of oneself or family)
- Changes in sexual desire
- Fatigue
- Change of appetite
- Crying
- Self-criticism
- Suicidal thoughts
- Change in sleeping patterns
- Increased use of substances to alter mood (e.g., drinking alcohol)
- Withdrawal from family, social interactions
- Over-focus on work or inability to focus on work

Regardless of what causes depression, the most important thing is to recognize that it may be happening and that professional help may be needed.

If a person feels that life is no longer worth living, they should get help to get past these feelings. They should call a crisis line, visit the Emergency Room of a hospital, or call a health care provider.

## Treating Depression

Antidepressant medication and counselling may be very effective treatments for depression. Medications are typically prescribed by physicians and psychiatrists, while counselling is provided by mental health professionals (e.g., psychologists or counsellors). It is important to make sure the health care provider is licensed to practice and trained to treat depression and that self-care and treatment/therapy recommendations are continued between sessions.

### About medication

Antidepressant medications help manage the symptoms of depression. There are some common categories of antidepressant medications including, but not limited to, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (e.g., Celexa®, Prozac®, Luvox®, Paxil®, Zoloft®), tricyclics (e.g., Elavil®, Anafranil®, Tofranil®), and monoamine oxidase inhibitors (e.g., Nardil®, Parnate®, Marplan®). A treating physician will prescribe the most suitable treatment medication, if necessary.

### Questions to ask a health care provider

It is important to be educated about any medications that are taken for any illness, and it is no different for medications taken for depression. Here are some general questions that may be asked of a doctor or pharmacist:



- How long will it take before I feel better?
- How often, and how much, do I take?
- What are the possible side effects, if any, and what can I do to best manage them?
- What is the best-tolerated treatment for my particular situation?
- Will this medication interfere with other medication(s) or herbal remedies that I take?
- Do I have allergies to this medication?
- What should I do if I don't feel better or if I miss a dose?
- Is there any written information I can get about this medication?
- Is there anything I should not do when taking this medication (e.g., operate heavy machinery, consume alcohol)?

A doctor or pharmacist should be consulted if there are any questions about medication.

### About counselling

Antidepressant medications can help improve mood. However, the personal, family, or workplace situations that may have contributed to low mood and other depression symptoms may still be there.

Counselling can help:

- Pinpoint life problems that contribute to depression.
- Review options and goals to enhance well-being.
- Identify thinking patterns that contribute to feelings of hopelessness.
- Help fill life with rewarding and pleasurable activities.

As with medication, there are different kinds of counselling. Two common methods are described below:

**Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.** This therapy helps to identify and change unrealistic and negative thinking that can contribute to depression and its symptoms. In addition, cognitive therapy helps with the development of healthy behaviours and problem-solving skills.

**Interpersonal Therapy.** This therapy helps with the development of new skills for creating healthy and satisfying relationships with partners, friends, co-workers, and family. This therapy can assist with understanding the connection between depression and life events (e.g., grief, conflict at work).

### Which treatment option is best?

Medication and counselling are both successful at treating the symptoms of depression. Sometimes these therapies are used alone, and sometimes in combination. The choice of which particular therapy is best for depression is always done in consultation with a health care provider. They are likely to consider:

- Is there a medical reason to avoid certain medications (e.g., pregnancy, breast feeding)?
- Is there a history of depression and treating it before? If so, what worked?
- Age and general health.
- Severity of the depression.
- Personal preferences and likelihood of completing the therapy (e.g., taking medication as prescribed, attending counselling sessions).
- Other life stressors that may be worsening depression symptoms.

### The Importance of Self-Care

When a person experiences depression, key ingredients of a healthy lifestyle can suffer—diet, physical activity levels and sleep. By the same token, maintaining adequate nutrition, regular physical activity and sticking to a proper sleep schedule can help relieve tension and stress, and leave a person less vulnerable to depression and mood changes.

Here are some self-care activities that may help to relieve symptoms of depression, prevent depression from recurring, and/or help other treatments work most effectively.

#### Stick to a regular sleep schedule

- Establish a regular, consistent time for sleeping and waking.

- Do something relaxing before sleep like reading (in a different room) or taking a warm bath.
- Don't use the bedroom for non-sleep activities (e.g., watching TV or eating in bed).
- Avoid strenuous exercise, caffeine, alcohol or tobacco a few hours before bedtime.
- Avoid naps during the day. Get outdoors for some activity (e.g., a short walk) to refresh.
- Talk to a health care provider about using a sleep medication.

### Stay active

- Choose activities that are enjoyable.
- Plan activities for the times when they can be performed consistently.
- Be active on a regular basis. Aim for 10 minutes of continuous activity, three times a week, as a start. As fitness increases, the duration and intensity of activity can be increased.
- Take advantage of opportunities to be more active by making small changes each day (e.g., take stairs instead of an elevator, exit a bus one stop earlier than a destination and walk).

### Keep up with proper nutrition

- Meals should be eaten at regular times (breakfast, lunch, dinner with a mid-morning and a mid-afternoon snack).
- Include a variety of healthy foods at mealtimes (e.g., whole grains, dark green vegetables, brightly coloured fruits, lean proteins, milk products). Avoid food with added fats, sugar and salt.
- Drink alcohol and caffeine in moderation.
- Drink several glasses of water each day (5-8 is a good goal).

It is always easier to make positive lifestyle changes with the support of others. Involving friends and family in the "get-better" plan may be helpful if a person is comfortable discussing their goals and treatment plan. For example, exercise with a friend, make healthy recipes for the entire family at mealtimes and participate in group activities.

## Maintaining Gains and Preventing Setbacks

Depression sometimes returns months or years after it first goes away. This is called relapse. The good news is that planning ahead for a relapse may help to reduce the severity of future depression and make recovery that much faster. Here are some tips that may help:

**Continue with self-care.** Anything that helps reduce depression (as long as it is a healthy choice) should be continued on a regular basis. This might mean reading, going for short walks, going to bed at regular times, talking with friends, attending counselling sessions and doing counselling homework.

**Follow health care provider advice.** As depression gets better, or when symptoms are no longer a problem, it can be tempting to stop medication or counselling. But sudden stops to treatment can lead to relapse (or withdrawal symptoms in the case of medication). Therefore, changes to a treatment plan should only be made in consultation with a health care provider.

**Avoid alcohol and recreational drugs.** These substances can slow or prevent full recovery and they can become problems if relied upon for symptom relief.

**Take part in social activities.** Staying connected to others (e.g., getting together to share activities, socializing with friends) can be a way to help prevent depression from returning.

**Take it slow.** If roles and responsibilities have been reduced, return to them in a gradual, step-by-step fashion rather than all at once.

**Create a "Mood 911" plan.** Develop a list of warning signs that indicate depression might be on the rise again, and have a plan ready to deal with these signs early. For example, if certain workplace situations trigger depression, create a plan of action for handling them before they are encountered, and put that plan into place when the troublesome situation arises.

**Arrange for continued support.** Ongoing support can help keep depression in check for a lifetime. Self-help groups organized by mental health advocacy associations are a great resource for information, counselling, and support. Self-help workbooks and websites (from a trusted source such as a national mental health association) can provide practical advice.

## Making the Return to Work Easier

If there has been an absence from the workplace, preparing to return to work may seem overwhelming, especially after being away for an extended period of time. To help make the return to work successful, the following tips may help.

**Think about what helps the most.** Each person is different. Some people need more flexible work arrangements (e.g., reduced hours, modified job duties) and others feel capable of returning to full capacity immediately.

**Clearly understand the return to work plan and be an active participant in its creation.** What are the hours? What are the expectations, roles, and responsibilities? Who needs to be informed?

**Understand privacy rights and be prepared for any disclosure (if necessary).** Details of an absence are private and confidential. However, there may be workplace policies that require that certain kinds of information be reported (e.g., safety sensitive positions, information needed for job accommodation purposes). If any disclosure is required, plan what to say and how much information to share. Questions about who to disclose information to, and how much information to disclose, should be directed to a third party such as a Human Resources representative or employee health professional.

**Learn about support options.** Good support is essential to a successful return. Find out what resources are available.

**Continue self-care efforts.**

**Watch for signs that depression may be returning.**

**Apply the tools developed in counselling.**

**Be aware that symptoms (agitation, worry) may fluctuate throughout the return to work process.**

Adjustments in the return to work plan, or the treatment plan, may be necessary.

### Remember...

With the right help, the right information, and the right support, depression can be controlled and people with depression can maintain a productive and rewarding life. If depression symptoms are persistent, a health care provider should be consulted.

For more information, visit these websites:

Canadian Mental Health Association:

[www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)

Mood Disorders Society of Canada:

[www.mooddisorderscanada.ca](http://www.mooddisorderscanada.ca)

Canadian Psychological Association: [www.cpa.ca](http://www.cpa.ca)



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