

Depression What it is and what helps

What the diagnosis means, and what you can start doing about it this week.

🕒 WHAT DEPRESSION IS

Depression is a low mood, or a loss of interest in things you used to enjoy, lasting most of the day for at least two weeks. Sleep, appetite, energy, motivation and concentration usually change too.

It is a broad label. Two people with the same diagnosis can have quite different problems underneath, and no blood test or scan can tell them apart. That is why finding what works can take some trial and adjustment with your clinician.

📍 WHERE IT COMES FROM

Usually from a mix of body, mind and circumstances: genes and illness, habits of thinking, and loss or loneliness. Each part feeds the others. Poor sleep makes work harder, trouble at work adds stress, and stress wrecks sleep, so treating one part often helps the rest.

Depression also tilts your thinking. It can feel like clarity, when the illness is making everything look worse than it is. Check your conclusions with people you trust.

📦 TREATMENT HAS THREE PARTS, AND MOST PEOPLE DO BEST WITH ALL THREE

Daily habits

Sleep, light, movement and time with people. They cost nothing and help whatever is causing the depression.

Talk therapy

Slower to start, but what you learn keeps working after therapy ends. Plan on at least one session a week.

Medication

Some people notice a change in about two weeks, with the full effect at four to six. Feeling a bit better makes the rest easier.

Start with what you can manage now and add the rest later. Expecting a treatment to fail makes it more likely to.

☀️ DO IT BEFORE YOU FEEL LIKE IT

Depression drains motivation, so you do less, and doing less makes you feel worse. Waiting until you feel like it rarely works.

Reverse the order. Pick something that usually helps, schedule it (a walk outside three times a week, say) and do it anyway. Your mood catches up afterward. If you keep missing it, shrink the goal and count the attempt.

🧑 WHAT THE DIAGNOSIS MEANS, AND WHAT IT DOESN'T

It's shorthand for choosing treatment. It doesn't sum you up, and it isn't always for life. Some people have just one episode.

Watch how you use the label. "I was too depressed to see my friends" lets it shrink your life. "I have depression, so I go anyway" uses it to look after yourself. The more depression feels like a fixed part of you, the harder it is to change.

Habits that help. Check one or two to start with.

- 1 ☐ Get up at the same time every day, weekends included
- 2 ☐ Get 15 minutes of outdoor light within an hour of waking
- 3 ☐ Eat, exercise and see people at regular times
- 4 ☐ Get some movement in most days
- 5 ☐ Keep evenings dim and put screens away before bed

- 6 ☐ Cut back on alcohol, which worsens mood and sleep
- 7 ☐ Stop daily cannabis, which saps the drive to recover
- 8 ☐ Use your phone and social media less, and on purpose
- 9 ☐ Reconnect with an old friend, team, class or faith group
- 10 ☐ Tell someone you trust, if it helps you stick with treatment

❓ STILL STUCK AFTER TRYING TREATMENT?

Ask your clinician about look-alikes that need other treatment:

- Bipolar-type depression, if bipolar runs in your family
- Trauma or PTSD (nightmares, jumpiness, fearful avoidance)
- Substance use, or a medical problem
- Long-running trouble in relationships

If therapy hasn't helped, the fit may have been wrong. A different therapist can make a big difference.

📖 BOOKS WORTH READING

Feeling Great by David Burns (the update of *Feeling Good*). Teaches you to catch and correct the negative thoughts depression feeds you.

The Happiness Trap by Russ Harris. Uses acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), a good fit if workbooks and homework aren't for you.

Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life teaches the same ACT skills. Its teen edition is easier going, even for adults.

⚠️ IF YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT SUICIDE OR HURTING YOURSELF

Call or text **988** (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) any time, or go to the nearest emergency room. If you are in immediate danger, call **911**.

Source. Adapted from a Psychofarm podcast conversation on depression between psychiatrists Dr. Malzberg and Dr. Fu.

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