

The Road to Recovery

Recovering requires action. But taking action is hard. In fact, just thinking about the things you should do to feel better, like going for a walk or spending time with friends, can be exhausting.

It's the Catch-22 of recovery. The things that help the most are the things that are most difficult to do. But there's a difference between difficult and impossible.

Start small and stay focused

The key to recovery is to start with a few small goals and slowly build from there. 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.

Take things one day at a time and reward yourself for each accomplishment. The steps may seem small, but they'll quickly add up. And for all the energy you put in to your depression recovery, you'll get back much more in return.

Self-help tip 1: Cultivate supportive relationships

Getting the support you need plays a big role in recovery. On your own, it can be difficult to maintain perspective and sustain the effort required to recover. But the very nature of mental illness makes it difficult to reach out for help. However, isolation and loneliness make mental illness even worse, so maintaining your close relationships and social activities are important.

The thought of reaching out to even close 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. You loved ones care about you and want to help.

- **Turn to trusted friends and family members.** Share what you're going through with the people you love and trust. 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.
- **Try to keep up with social activities even if you don't feel like it.** When you're depressed, it feels more comfortable to retreat into your shell. But being around other people will make you feel less depressed.
- **Join a support group.** Being with others who are dealing with mental illness can go a long way in reducing your sense of isolation. You can also encourage each other, give and receive advice on how to cope, and share your experiences.

10 tips for reaching out and building relationships

1. Talk to one person about your feelings.
2. Help someone else by volunteering.
3. Have lunch or coffee with a friend.
4. Ask a loved one to check in with you regularly.
5. Accompany someone to the movies, a concert, or a small get-together.
6. Call or email an old friend.
7. Go for a walk with a workout buddy.
8. Schedule a weekly dinner date.
9. Meet new people by taking a class or joining a club.
10. Confide in a counselor, therapist, or clergy member.

Self-help tip 2: Take care of yourself

In order to overcome mental illness, you have to nurture yourself. This includes making time for things you enjoy, asking for help from others, setting limits on what you're able to do, adopting healthy habits, and scheduling fun activities into your day.

Do things you enjoy (or used to)

While you can't force yourself to have fun or experience pleasure, you can choose to do things that you used to enjoy. Pick up a former hobby or a sport you used to like. Express yourself creatively through music, art, or writing. Go out with friends. Take a day trip to a museum, the mountains, or the ballpark.

Develop a wellness toolbox

Come up with 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. The more "tools" for coping with depression, the better. Try and implement a few of these ideas each day, even if you're feeling good.

1. Spend some time in nature.
2. List what you like about yourself.
3. Read a good book.
4. Watch a funny movie or TV show.
5. Take a long, hot bath.
6. Listen to music.
7. Take care of a few small tasks.
8. Play with a pet.
9. Write in your journal.
10. Do something spontaneous.

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. Even if your depression doesn't lift immediately, you'll gradually feel more upbeat and energetic as you make time for fun activities.

Self-help tip 3: 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. In fact, studies show that regular exercise can be as effective as antidepressant medication at increasing energy levels and decreasing feelings of fatigue.

Scientists haven't figured out exactly why exercise is such a potent antidepressant, but evidence suggests that physical activity increases mood-enhancing neurotransmitters in the brain, raises endorphins, reduces stress, and relieves muscle tension – all things that can have a positive effect on depression.

To get the most benefit, aim for 30 minutes of exercise per day. But you can start small. Short 10-minute bursts of activity can have a positive effect on your mood. Here are a few easy ways to get moving:

- Take the stairs rather than the elevator
- Park your car in the farthest spot in the lot
- Take your dog for a walk
- Pair up with an exercise partner
- Walk while you're talking on the phone

As a next step, try incorporating walks or some other enjoyable, easy form of exercise into your daily routine. The key is to pick an activity you enjoy, so you're more likely to keep up with it.

Self-help tip 4: Eat a healthy, mood-boosting diet

What you eat has a direct impact on the way you feel. Aim for a balanced diet of protein, complex carbohydrates, fruits and vegetables.

- **Don't neglect breakfast.** A solid breakfast provides energy for the day.
- **Don't skip meals.** Going too long between meals can make you feel irritable and tired, so aim to eat something at least every 3-4 hours.
- **Minimize sugar and refined carbs.** You may crave sugary snacks, baked goods, or comfort foods such as pasta or french fries. But these “feel-good” foods quickly lead to a crash in mood and energy.
- **Focus on complex carbohydrates.** Foods such as baked potatoes, whole-wheat pasta, brown rice, oatmeal, whole grain breads, and bananas can boost serotonin levels without a crash.
- **Boost your B vitamins.** Deficiencies in B vitamins such as folic acid and B-12 can trigger depression. To get more, take a B-complex vitamin supplement or eat more citrus fruit, leafy greens, beans, chicken, and eggs.
- **Consider taking a chromium supplement.** Some depression studies show that chromium picolinate reduces carbohydrate cravings, eases mood swings, and boosts energy. Supplementing with chromium picolinate is especially effective for people who tend to overeat and oversleep when depressed.
- **Practice mindful eating.** Slow down and pay attention to the full experience of eating. Enjoy the taste of your food

Self-help tip 5: Challenge negative thinking

Depression puts a negative spin on everything, including the way you see yourself, the situations you encounter, and your expectations for the future.

But you can't break out of this pessimistic mind frame by “just thinking positive.” Happy thoughts or wishful thinking won't cut it. Rather, the trick is to replace negative thoughts with more balanced thoughts.

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. Think about less harsh statements that offer more realistic descriptions.
- **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. For a second opinion, you can also ask a friend or therapist to go over your log with you.
- **Replace negatives with positives.** Review your negative thought log. Then, for each negative thought, write down something positive. For instance, “My boss hates me. She gave me this difficult report to complete” could be replaced with, “My boss must have a lot of faith in me to give me so much responsibility.”
- **Socialize with positive people.** Notice how people who always look on the bright side deal with challenges, even minor ones, like not being able to find a parking space. Then consider how you would react in the same situation. Even if you have to pretend, try to adopt their optimism and persistence in the face of difficulty.

Self-help tip 6: Raise your emotional intelligence

Emotions are powerful. They can override thoughts and profoundly influence behavior. But if you are emotionally intelligent, you can harness the power of your emotions.

Emotional intelligence isn't a safety net that protects you from life's tragedies, frustrations, or disappointments. We all go through disappointments, loss, and change. And while these are normal parts of life, they can still cause sadness, anxiety, and stress. But emotional intelligence gives you the ability to cope and bounce back from adversity, trauma, and loss. In other words, emotional intelligence makes you resilient.

Emotional intelligence gives you the ability to:

- Remain hopeful during challenging and difficult times
- Manage strong feelings and impulses
- Quickly rebound from frustration and disappointment
- Ask for and get support when needed
- Solve problems in positive, creative ways

Learn how to raise your emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence gives you the tools for coping with difficult situations and maintaining a positive outlook. It helps you stay focused, flexible, and creative in bad times as well as good. The capacity to recognize your emotions and express them appropriately helps you avoid getting stuck in depression, anxiety, or other negative mood states.

Self-help tip 7: Know when to get additional help

If you find your depression getting worse and worse, [seek professional help](#). Needing additional help doesn't mean you're weak. Sometimes the negative thinking in depression can make you feel like you're a lost cause, but depression can be treated and you can feel better!