

Dealing with Depression

Using exercise, diet & relaxation to address depression

The following suggestions to address depression and stress issues are suggested as self-help options. Additional or alternative strategies include counseling and/or prescribed antidepressant medication. The following suggestions are extracted from various resources, including the websites in the references below.

Exercise as an Antidepressant

The following exercise tips offer a powerful prescription for boosting mood:

- **Exercise now...and again.** A 10-minute walk can improve your mood for two hours. The key to sustaining mood benefits is to exercise regularly.
- **Choose activities that are moderately intense.** Aerobic exercise undoubtedly has mental health benefits, but you don't need to sweat strenuously to see results.
- **Find exercises that are continuous and rhythmic (rather than intermittent).** Walking, swimming, dancing, stationary biking, and yoga are good choices.
- **Add a mind-body element.** Activities such as yoga and tai chi rest your mind and pump up your energy. You can also add a meditative element to walking or swimming by repeating a mantra (a word or phrase) as you move.
- **Start slowly, and don't overdo it.** More isn't better. Athletes who over train find their moods drop rather than lift.

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. Aim for 600 mcg per day.
- **Practice mindful eating.** Slow down and pay attention to the full experience of eating. Enjoy the taste of your food

Omega-3 fatty acids play an essential role in stabilizing mood.

- Foods rich in certain omega-3 fats called EPA and DHA can give your mood a big boost. The best sources are fatty fish such salmon, herring, mackerel, anchovies, sardines, and some cold water fish oil supplements. Canned albacore tuna and lake trout can also be good sources depending on how the fish were raised and processed.
- You may hear a lot about getting your omega-3's from foods rich in ALA fatty acids. Main sources are vegetable oils and nuts (especially walnuts), flax, soybeans, and tofu. Be aware that our bodies generally convert very little ALA into EPA and DHA, so you may not as big of a benefit.
- Some people avoid seafood because they worry about mercury or other possible toxins. But most experts agree that the benefits of eating 2 servings a week of cold water fatty fish outweigh the risks.

Progressive muscle relaxation for stress relief

Progressive muscle relaxation is another effective and widely used strategy for stress relief. It involves a two-step process in which you systematically tense and relax different muscle groups in the body.

With regular practice, progressive muscle relaxation gives you an intimate familiarity with what tension—as well as complete relaxation—feels like in different parts of the body. This awareness helps you spot and counteract the first signs of the muscular tension that accompanies stress. And as your body relaxes, so will your mind. You can combine deep breathing with progressive muscle relaxation for an additional level of relief from stress.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Sequence

- Right foot
- Left foot
- Right calf
- Left calf
- Right thigh
- Left thigh
- Hips and buttocks
- Stomach
- Chest
- Back
- Right arm and hand
- Left arm and hand
- Neck and shoulders
- Face

Most progressive muscle relaxation practitioners start at the feet and work their way up to the face. For a sequence of muscle groups to follow, see the box to the right:

- Loosen your clothing, take off your shoes, and get comfortable.
- Take a few minutes to relax, breathing in and out in slow, deep breaths.
- When you're relaxed and ready to start, shift your attention to your right foot. Take a moment to focus on the way it feels.
- Slowly tense the muscles in your right foot, squeezing as tightly as you can. Hold for a count of 10.
- Relax your right foot. Focus on the tension flowing away and the way your foot feels as it becomes limp and loose.
- Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
- When you're ready, shift your attention to your left foot. Follow the same sequence of muscle tension and release.
- Move slowly up through your body — legs, abdomen, back, neck, face — contracting and relaxing the muscle groups as you go.

Sleeping problems

- Do physical exercise every day (but avoid doing this in the 4 hours before bedtime)
- Allow yourself time to wind down before bed. Stop work or study at least half an hour before bedtime
- Try and get up at the same time each day, and get up when you wake up
- If you have a late night, rather than sleeping in, have an early night the next night
- Don't take naps during the daytime
- Avoid or cut down on coffee, energy drinks, tobacco and alcohol, especially in the evening as it makes it harder for you to go to sleep at night (4-6 hours before bed)
- If you can't sleep because you are worrying about an unresolved issue, try setting aside time during the day for problem solving
- Try things that can help with relaxation, such as yoga, meditation, or breathing exercises
- Having to deal with bright lights or loud noises whilst in bed can impair sleep, the best sleeping environment is a dark, quiet room
- Too much stimulating activity before bed, be it vigorous exercise, or violent images on TV, can make it difficult to sleep. TV is best avoided altogether
- Worrying about life issues such as a new job, family conflicts, work deadlines, or financial worries can keep you up at night. Relaxation or stress management techniques can help with this.
- Try keeping a sleep diary. By recording the following information daily, you may be able to pinpoint what is impairing your sleep;
 - Physical exercise undertaken
 - Types of food eaten and time of consumption
 - Time you went to bed and time you woke up
 - Total sleep hours, quality of sleep

- Times you woke during the night and what you did (stayed in bed with eyes closed, got up for a drink then went back to bed etc)
- Amount of caffeine and alcohol and time of consumption
- Feelings – happy, sad, anxious, stressed
- Drugs or medication taken, amount and time of consumption
- Avoid sleeping on your back
- Try elevating the head of your bed by a few centimetres
- Avoid sedatives and narcotics as they slow down the activity of breathing muscles and may in fact contribute to a worse sleep
- Bedrooms are for sleeping and sex, not for watching television or doing work
- Develop sleeping rituals that are quiet and relaxing, such as reading, 15 minutes before bed.
- Don't sacrifice sleep in order to do daytime activities (such as visiting friends, eating out, watching TV, surfing the internet)
- Try taking a hot bath before bed
- Have the right sunlight exposure. Because daylight is key to regulating our sleeping patterns, try to get outside for at least 30 minutes per day
- Avoid large meals and beverages late at night. Large meals may cause indigestion, and beverages may result in waking up during the night to urinate.