Find Out Why Depression Happens and How to Help Yourself

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A Depression Self-Help Guide

With contributions from Krysti Ostermeyer.

Everyone has their bad days when they feel under the weather and when they just want to stay in bed. But there are some of us that cannot shake the blues. Depression can persist for days, making it difficult to work, take care of the family, and perform everyday tasks. There are many causes of depression. It is something that cannot be ignored if it goes on for more than a week, especially if there is no reason to be feeling down.

The following is an overview of what major factors could contribute to a person experiencing depression:

- Life events that are causing stress
- Any medical problems
- Medication side effect
- Imbalance of neurotransmitters in the brain
- Genetic factors

Different depression disorders may arise from these factors. They are major depression, persistent depressive disorder, psychotic depression, postpartum depression, seasonal affective disorder, and bipolar disorder.

1. **Major depression** – If you have major depression, the symptoms will be severe enough to interfere with your work, sleep, and other areas of your life. It usually is situational, where someone close dies, for example. This type of depression can occur multiple times in a lifetime.
2. **Persistent depressive disorder** – This disorder is one that lasts for at least 2 years in duration. This person will have episodes of major depression along with less severe symptoms in between.
3. **Postpartum depression** – If you just had a baby and feel overwhelmingly helpless, this could be attributed to postpartum depression. Hormonal changes and having the responsibility of a newborn can bring this on.
4. **Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)** – This condition comes about in the winter months when there is less natural light and shorter days. The depression then goes away in the spring and summer months. SAD can be treated with light therapy or antidepressant medication.
5. **Bipolar disorder** — Bipolar disorder is not as common as the others. It is called manic-depressive disorder also. A person afflicted would experience extreme highs and extreme lows in mood. This is usually due to a chemical imbalance in the brain.

How Can I Help Myself If I Am Depressed?

When you have depression, you will feel exhausted and helpless. All hope will seem to be lost. It will take everything in you to get up and do anything about it. It is imperative that you seek help to get better. You can do things for yourself as well if you follow these depression self-help guidelines:

Self-Care

Ahhh, self-care – a buzz word in today's society, and for very good reason, too!

In an ever-changing world that is increasingly reliant on technology and less focused on face-to-face interaction, self-care often hits the wayside. Maria Baratta Ph.D., L.C.S.W, defines self-care as "the mindful taking time to pay attention to you, not in a narcissistic way, but in a way that ensures that you are being cared for by you."

Self-care means different things to different people. For example, an athlete with a frenetic lifestyle may get massages weekly because it feels good to their body. A teacher with a free period may use that period to quietly play music while grading papers rather than interact with other teachers. A nurse may choose to use her lunch break to meditate away from a busy unit.

Practicing self-care is important to *everyone*, regardless of their career or age. It is especially important to those with mental health disorders.

Connection

Sure, a weekly or monthly appointment with a therapist might be essential, but find a connection with at least one friend or a close family member who you can speak with.

Discussing your feelings, problems, and emotions might be difficult, but making that connection with someone that you love and trust will make it easier.

Bonus: once you get used to sharing with this person or group of people, it will get easier to open up as time goes on.

Get Moving

The last thing that you may want to do is exercise but exercising produces endorphins. It is common knowledge that endorphins make us happier.

If you've never been someone who has exercised before, experiment with different types of exercise. You don't need to purchase an expensive gym membership to reap the benefits!

Seek out community exercise classes, attend a yoga class, find a barre class on YouTube, or simply put on a pair of tennis shoes and take a walk or a slow jog! Make it even more fun by asking your children to dance with you or seeking out an accountability partner to exercise with you.

Yes, it is hard to get off the couch when we're feeling pretty awful – but studies indicate that exercise actually helps the brain produce new neurons.

This may not mean that you're ready to kick your antidepressant – but it is a great way to feel better.

Meditation

Anecdotally, I can tell you that meditation has improved my life immensely. I can't tell you that my mental health has improved by X% in X amount of days, but I can tell you that the practice of meditation has been life-changing.

I started a meditation practice when I was getting ready for a craniotomy. I already had anxiety, but it worsened with all the "what ifs" of the procedure. I relied heavily on the meditation practice during my recovery – and a year and a half later, my meditation practice is going strong.

As an anxious person, I still have a difficult time quieting my mind. I rely on guided meditations. However, when a guided meditation isn't available to me (like a busy story or a traffic jam) I practice breathing exercises or repeat

mantras.

Journal

Cliché, yes. Essential? Definitely.

I keep notebooks all over my house. I always carry a planner and several mini-Moleskin notebooks with me. Why? Because I need to jot down my thoughts and feelings at a moment's notice.

Without a pen and paper, how can I dissect my interactions with others that would otherwise cause my distress? How else would I be able to lament about the issues in my life that are causing me to feel badly about myself? How else can I also keep track of the progress I've made in improving my mental health?

Journaling is probably the most powerful tool in my depression self-help repertoire.

Find *Your* Thing

Find the self-care "tool" that makes you feel great. Something that you can rely on that will make your body and mind feel amazing.

For me, I read books. I buy them on my Kindle. I purchase them from Amazon and Target. I check them out from the library. I trade with friends. I always have a stack of books on my bedside. I am never without a book to read.

I also get monthly massages. It is an indulgence that I save up for – and as a bonus, I see a massage therapist who is also skilled in working with my migraines.

What is something that you can do for yourself that will make *you* feel great?