

16 Strategies for Depression

This handout was created by Dr. Joseph M. Ripperger, MD. The current depression theory is that mood disorders are caused by chronic inflammatory effects in the brain and body. Below is a checklist of things you can do to reduce these inflammatory changes and improve your chances for a complete recovery. They are listed in order of importance. Begin with Tier 1 and work your way down to Tier 4.

Tier 1

1. Normalize your sleep cycle

- Set a routine wake-up time and get 7-8 hours of sleep each night.
- Bedtime can vary but prepare with a "bedtime ritual."
- Ask for complete list of proper sleep hygiene suggestions or consider a hypnotic medication if needed.

2. Antidepressant Medication

- Can usually begin noticing positive effects within first 2 weeks.
- Requires 4-6 weeks to be effective, with maximum effectiveness at 12 weeks.
- Should be taken for minimum of 6 months.

3. Psychotherapy

- Education and counseling to address your identified distressing issues
- Usually time limited.
- Medical research has shown this to be as effective as antidepressant medication.
- May involve specific anti-rumination strategies to reduce negative thinking.

4. Increase Physical Activity

- At least 45 minutes of moderate-intensity activity, 5 days per week: this means "breaking a sweat", such as fast walking, cycling, or lawn work.
- At least 30 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity, 4 days per week, such as jogging, stair climbing, or swimming).
- If you can schedule with a partner who is committed, you are more likely to be consistent.
- Medical research has shown that aerobic exercise has the same therapeutic effects on the brain as an antidepressant.
- Read [Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain](#) by John Ratey, M.D. and Eric Hagerman.

Tier 2

5. Change Your Diet

- Eat a low glycemic-load, Mediterranean-style diet with adequate protein and plant foods. Avoid highly-processed foods.
- Eat foods high in antioxidants such flavonoids and carotenes. Examples include colorful foods such as carrots, broccoli, oranges, red grapes, strawberries, blueberries, tea, tomatoes, apples, and dark chocolate (yes, chocolate!).
- Always eat breakfast.
- When snacking, eat nutritious combination such as:
 - Whole grain bagel and fruit (blueberries or tomatoes)
 - Piece of fruit with crackers and cheese
 - Yogurt or cottage cheese with a piece of fruit.
 - Carrots or celery with peanut butter or cream cheese.
- If uncertain about what to eat, read AntiCancer- A New Way of Life by David Servan-Schieber

6. Social Support

- Seek out and surround yourself with positive, happy friends or family.
- Avoid negative or unhappy people.
- Avoid spending time alone as this increases negative ruminations and worry.

7. Relaxation Techniques (or Meditation)

- The easiest to use is “The Relaxation Response.”
- Has been shown to improve sleep and your immune response, reduce anxiety, and prevent relapse of depression.
- Perform 3-4 times weekly.
- Ask for handout if interested in this.

8. Limit Alcohol Intake

- Maximum limit for healthy **men** up to age 65: no more than 4 drinks per day, and no more than 14 drinks per week.
- For healthy **women** (and healthy men over age 65): no more than 3 drinks per day, and no more than 7 drinks per week.
- Remember alcohol is a depressant and will exacerbate depression.
- Alcohol can also disrupt sleep.

9. Weight Management

- Obesity causes multiple health problems, including sleep disturbance, depression, and reduced energy.
- Begin to gradually “trend down” weight toward target Body Mass Index (BMI) 18.5-25. Ask for handout if this interests you.

Tier 3

10. Address Marital (or Couple) Problems

- Studies show a “bad” marriage reduces your chances of recovery by 50%.
- Consider marital or couple counseling.
- Read The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work by John Gottman, Ph.D.

11. Balance Work Responsibilities

- If working more than 50 hours per week, consider reducing work hours to less than 45 hours per week.
- Take regular vacations (at least 2-4 weeks)
- Ask for time off from work until feeling better.

12. Spirituality

- Studies show that people who believe in a higher power are healthier and happier.
- Begin a “spiritual practice.”
- Examples include regular prayer, meditative practice, yoga, gratitude work, drumming, or joining a church.

13. Over-the-Counter Nutritional Supplements

- SAMe
 - A salt-like metabolite involved in biosynthesis of norepineprine, serotonin and dopamine.
 - Dosage is 800-1600 mg/day for 6 weeks.
 - Can speed the onset of antidepressants or augment effects of antidepressants.
- Omega-3 Fatty Acids (EPA or DHA)
 - Usually from fish oils and may increase CNS serotonin and have anti-inflammatory effects.
 - Dosage is 1 gram daily.
 - Augments effects of antidepressant and EPA is more effective than DHA.
- N-acetylcysteine (NAC)
 - Enhances production of glutathione (GSH), a powerful antioxidant that protects the brain from stress.
 - Dosage starts at 600 mg twice daily.
 - Augments antidepressant or may even work without an antidepressant.

Tier 4

14. Bright Light Exposure

- Especially effective for those who notice a seasonal (fall/winter) component of depressed mood.
- 10 to 15 minutes per day of full-body direct sun skin exposure.
- An alternative would be at least 30 minutes per day by using a special light box that emits 10,000 lux.
- Light boxes can be ordered on-line at www.northernlighttechnologies.com or www.LightTherapyProducts.com.

15. Yoga

- Medical studies have shown this can reduce depressive symptoms, reduce tension, and decrease chronic pain.
- Twice weekly for 30-60 minutes.
- Best suited for younger people or those who are relatively fit.

16.) Education (Bibliotherapy)

- Reading self-help books will assist you in your recovery.
- Suggested books include:
 - The Art of Happiness by Howard Cutler, MD and the Dalai Lama.
 - Learned Optimism or Authentic Happiness by Martin Seligman, Ph.D.
 - Feeling Good by David Burns, MD.
- Support Groups
 - National Alliance for Mentally Ill (NAMI) www.nami.org.
 - Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA) www.dbsalliance.org.