

Self-Care for Depression



Did you know that scientific studies have shown that exercise is just as powerful as an antidepressant medication for treating depression, when it is practiced regularly?

How are you sleeping? Depression sometimes affects sleep; we may sleep too much, or too little. Improving our sleep can be an important element of depression treatment.



Believe it or not, how we eat also can affect our mood for the better, or worse.

In this section we talk in more detail about how taking care of your body can help you manage your depression.

"Self-care:" An Important Part of Managing Depression

Battling depression requires a multifaceted strategy; we have to "unite our forces" to keep depression from interfering with our life aims. CBT supplies us with some of the ammunition to wage this battle, but other lifestyle factors are important, as well. Below we discuss some of these factors; consider them when assessing your challenges with depression. Consider trying out some changes to see if they help.

Moderate and Balance Coping Skills

Address depression from a variety of different angles by confronting situations, problem solving, accepting that which cannot be controlled, and modifying thinking when necessary. Take care of the body and mind, addressing the important elements of self-care listed below. Remember that "diversity" is the cardinal rule when it comes to coping with challenges; the more skills and coping methods we have, the more flexible we can be when challenges arise.

Avoid or limit use of "mind altering drugs"

Be aware that all drugs that alter state of mind such as alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, marijuana, other illicit drugs, can exacerbate depression in both the short and long term. Discuss your use of these substances openly with a prescribing clinician to understand better your own risk factors.

Treat Mental Illness

Learn to manage depression using CBT skills. Treat other forms of mental illness if they interfere with your life. If the therapy you try does not seem to be working, try another therapy style or therapist. Consider a "combination therapy," which combines an assortment of therapy skills, medication, and self-care.

Diet

Eating a balanced diet helps us maintain health, improves energy, and contributes to good mood. Be aware of the quality of your food, as well as how much you eat; eating either too much or too little can affect how you feel on a daily basis.

Confront Conflict

Do not allow interpersonal conflicts to fester; learn assertiveness and other communication skills and address conflict proactively and diplomatically.

Sleep

Research has shown that most people need an average of about 7 hours of sleep per night. Sleeping well is an important aspect of managing depression. Talk to your doctor or therapist about a referral for a consultation with a sleep expert if you suffer from insomnia or sleep apnea.



Goal Setting

Set realistic goals in line with your life aims. Strive for balance of meaningful work, interpersonal (family and friends), and enjoyment-oriented goals. Remember to take one small step at a time to reach larger goals.

Exercise

Regular exercise has been shown to be as good as antidepressant medication for treating depression and increases our resistance to debilitating anxiety. Try to get a minimum of 20 minutes of vigorous cardiovascular exercise at least three times a week. Of course, be sure to ask your doctor if you are healthy enough for more intensive exercise.

Treat Physical Illness

Scientific research shows a connection between physical health, mood, and anxiety. Learn about your family medical history, go to the doctor as needed, and take prescribed medications.

Slow down

Ask yourself: "Has there been a day this week in which I did not "rush" at all? Keeping a constant fast pace in activity, whether walking, working, or even planning leisure activities, communicates a sense of urgency to the brain, raising blood pressure and tension in the body. This has an impact on our mood from day-to-day. Practice "slowing down" your pace of life consciously to reduce this sense of urgency.

Time Management

Set realistic goals about what can be accomplished in a certain amount of time. Avoid multi-tasking excessively. Plan your day with enough time left over to sleep enough, exercise, and enjoy a leisure activity. If you feel that you have trouble managing your time, discuss it with a therapist or life coach.

Social Support

When we feel supported by others, we feel more safe, secure, and happy. One important approach to treating depression is to reduce symptoms; another way is to increase positive experiences, especially with people that help us feel good about ourselves.

Sleep Hygiene

"Sleep hygiene" is a fancy way to refer to good sleeping habits. We often underestimate how much sleep impacts our mood and functioning. Lack of sleep or poor quality of sleep is sometimes caused by engaging in certain behaviors (often just out of habit) that are problematic in helping our body relax and fall asleep.

How are your sleeping habits?

Check the statements that apply to you:

- I look at my cell phone, work on my computer, or watch TV before bed
- I clean my house or do other physically stimulating activities before bed
- I drink caffeinated beverages (coffee, tea, soda, energy drinks, hot chocolate) after dinner time
- My room is hot
- I sleep with lights on
- I do work in bed
- I go to sleep at different times every night
- I take naps
- Sometimes I stay in bed awake for hours just trying to fall asleep
- I drink alcohol to help me sleep
- Worries often keep me up



How to improve your sleep...

If you're having trouble sleeping and checked one or more of the boxes from the previous page, chances are you could benefit from working on better sleep hygiene.

Here are some suggestions:

- Get regular exercise (we will talk about this later).
- Plan to get to sleep at the same time every night.
- Avoid naps. This will help your body get into a natural sleep cycle.
- Designate your bed for sleep (and sexual activity) only. When we work and do other activities in bed our brain gets confused about what to do when it's bed time.
- Avoid stimulating physical activity too close to bedtime (3-4 hours before bed).
- Avoid alcohol and sugar before bed.
- Keep your room cool (about 65 degrees) and very dark.
- If worry is a problem before bed, "schedule" worrying earlier in the day.
- Take a warm bath or drink warm milk.
- Listen to relaxing or ambient music before bed.
- Do breathing exercises or progressive muscle relaxation.



Exercise

You've probably heard that exercise is as good for your mind as it is for your body. Current mental health research shows that exercise is just as powerful as an antidepressant medication when it is practiced as a program.



To be even more scientifically specific, exercise is thought to stimulate the neurotransmitter (brain chemical) serotonin which plays a role in experiencing positive emotions. This is the same neurotransmitter that is targeted with SSRI anti-depressant medications. It can also help regulate sleep (as mentioned earlier) which is an important factor in caring for your depression.

So how much will I need?



The Department of Health and Human Services suggests 150 minutes of moderately intense exercise per week. Current literature on depression suggests that when using exercise as a tool to treat your mood, individuals should exercise at moderate intensity for 25 minutes 3-5 days per week.

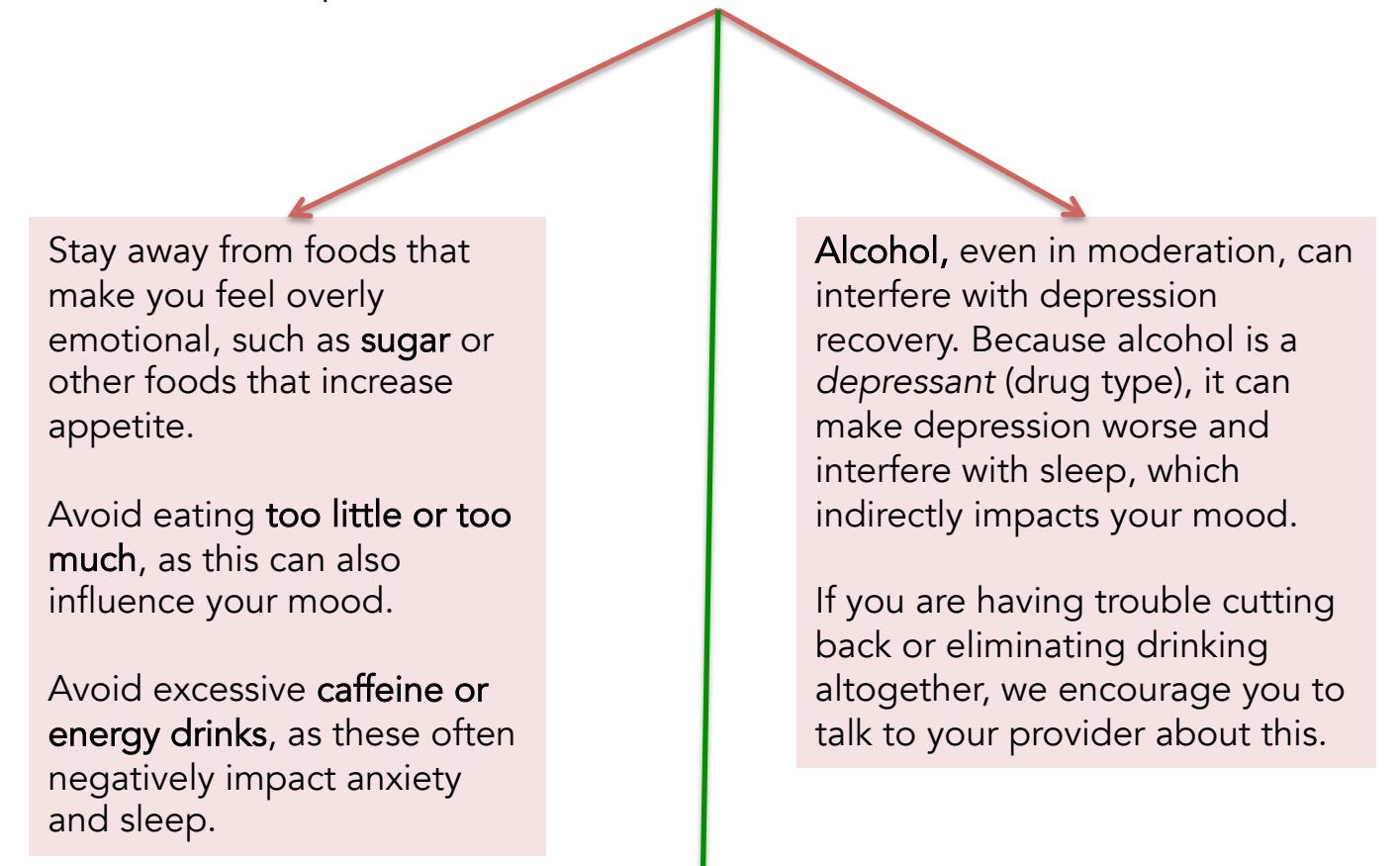
What is "moderate" intensity? Basically, it's physical exercise that brings your heart rate up. For example, walking at a fast pace, climbing stairs, and riding a stationary bike.



If you are interested in pursuing exercise as a primary tool for your depression, be sure to talk to your doctor first to review your physical health. Talk to your individual therapist about this so that you can work on this goal together in your CBT treatment.

Food for Your Mood?

How we eat can impact our mood. Here are some tips for improving your mood by paying attention to how you eat.



Fat for brain health!

Research suggests that eating foods rich in **Omega-3 fatty acids** can help fight depression. Walnuts, flax seeds, salmon, and sardines are all foods that are naturally high in Omega-3's; however, it is difficult to get enough through diet alone when using as an alternate to antidepressant medication. Omega-3 supplements have been shown to be helpful in improving mood; it is important that the supplement to have two fatty acids: EPA and DHA (both have been shown to improve mood in scientific studies). According to current literature depressed individuals should take 1 gram of EPA per day for optimal results. If you have questions about types of Omega-3 supplements, we encourage you talk to your provider.



My Self-Care Plan

Use the following worksheet and design your own self-care plan. Review the previous pages to get ideas.

My Self-Care Plan (how I plan to incorporate self-care into my daily life)

Sleep: _____

Diet: _____

Exercise: _____

Time management: _____

Treat physical illness: _____

Social Support: _____

Others? _____

Notes

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