



men &

Depression Toolkit

A guide to understanding what
depression means and how to overcome it



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What Is Depression?



What Does 'Depressed' Actually Mean?

Everyone has days where they feel 'depressed'. A cold, grey, rainy day might make you feel sad or 'blue'. A bad performance review or argument with your partner could leave you feeling a bit down or unhappy. You might even tell a friend you were feeling 'depressed'.

Depression is not just a day or two of feeling a bit sad or lacking energy. It is a significant mood disorder that can negatively impact your day-to-day life.

There is no single cause for depression. Instead, there are many variables that can influence whether a person becomes depressed. The risk factors outlined below may make you more likely to have a depressive episode.

- Family history can play a role. If you have a close family member with a history of depression, you may be more likely to become depressed yourself. Brain chemistry may be a factor here as some people have lower levels of key neurotransmitters that help regulate mood.

What Does 'Depressed' Actually Mean?

- Traumatic experiences or difficult life events can contribute to depression. Events such as childhood abuse, the death of someone close to you, experiencing a natural disaster, or intergenerational trauma can all contribute to depression.
- Excessive stress or worries about income, housing, prejudice, microaggressions, or job stress can be contributing factors.
- Chronic medical conditions (Alzheimer's Disease, Parkinson's, cancer, arthritis, obesity, and more) or certain medications used to treat these or other diseases can contribute to depression.
- Some people experience seasonal affective disorder (SAD) where the shorter days and longer hours of darkness through the winter months can create the right conditions for depression. SAD can be helped by more exposure to light, either real or artificial.

Substance abuse issues can happen concurrently with depression, so if you have an increasing drinking or drug use problem, it is possible that there is underlying depression.



What Does 'Depressed' Actually Mean?

Depression can affect as many as 5% of Canadians in any given year, with as many as 4 in 10 people saying they have felt feelings of anxiety or depression but have not sought treatment. If you are depressed, you are not alone.

The important thing to remember is that depression is treatable and that it is possible to feel better.



¹ Canada, P. H. A. of. (2016, December 30). What is Depression? Canada.ca. Retrieved March 13, 2022, from <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/chronic-diseases/mental-illness/what-depression.html>

² National Institute of Mental Health (2021, March). Substance use and co-occurring mental disorders. NIMH. Retrieved March 13, 2022, from <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/substance-use-and-mental-health>





Symptoms Of Depression



Symptoms Of Depression

Every person experiences depression in different ways. In general, men and women experience depression differently.

Men frequently downplay their signs and symptoms to appear 'strong' and in control. You may say you are just "stressed" since that is a socially acceptable way to acknowledge life can be challenging and you're having difficulty coping. Many men were raised to not discuss feelings and emotions, which makes admitting feelings of depression very uncomfortable. You may also be concerned about how you will be viewed by family, friends, and colleagues if you seek help.



If you are experiencing some or many of the following symptoms most of the day, every day, for at least two weeks, you may be suffering from depression.

Your behaviour may change. You may:

- Lose interest in activities (sports, hobbies, friends, etc.) that you usually enjoy
- Have poor concentration or struggle with making simple decisions
- Find yourself escaping into your work or obsessively pursuing hobbies
- Find yourself indulging in reckless behaviour – dangerous sports, reckless driving, unsafe sex
- Drink too much, take drugs or gamble compulsively

Symptoms Of Depression

You may experience some of the following thoughts and feelings:


 **Guilt or worthlessness**

 **Thoughts of suicide**

 **Hopelessness or Helplessness**

 **People would be better off without you**

 **Irritability, even with simple things**

 **Indecisiveness or a sense of being overwhelmed**

Anger - this could include being overly sensitive to criticism, road rage or even being abusive to others



³ Pelley, L. (2016, June 13). Mental illness still viewed as a sign of weakness. Toronto Star, E1. Retrieved March 13, 2022 from <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/mental-illness-still-viewed-as-sign-weakness/docview/1795816367/se-2?accountid=46584>

⁴ Mayo Clinic Staff. (2019, May 21). Male depression: Understanding the issues. Mayo Clinic. Retrieved March 13, 2022, from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/in-depth/male-depression/art-20046216>

Symptoms Of Depression

You may even notice some physical signs, such as:

- Finding yourself eating more or less than usual, with a resulting change in weight
- Sleep disturbances, ranging from sleeping too much to sleeping too little, having trouble falling or staying asleep
- A decreased sexual drive or loss of interest in sex
- Headaches, backaches, sexual dysfunction, or ongoing digestive issues
- Changes in your energy level – you may feel restless and jumpy or slower than usual

If you are having thoughts of suicide, call 911 or contact the Canada Suicide Prevention Service to seek immediate help.

If you are wondering if what you are feeling might be depression, there are many online assessments you can take to help you determine that for sure, including:

Heads Up Guys Self-Check
Calgary Counselling Centre Depression Screening



You Are Not Alone





If you are depressed, you don't have to fight through it alone. Whether you turn to a loved one or a professional, taking that first step will require courage. A doctor may prescribe an antidepressant, depending on the severity of your feelings but there are things you can do beyond medication that will help you to feel better.

With a bit of time and support, and some basic lifestyle changes, you can feel like yourself again. The number one thing to remember as you start to make these changes is to be kind to yourself. Meaningful change takes time, and you won't feel better immediately even as you start to take steps towards improvement.

Increase Your Physical Activity



Improve Your Sleep Habits



Learn To Manage Stress



7 Ways To Improve Your Mood



Make Dietary Changes

Seek Support



Grow A Social Life



Rebuild Intimate Connections



01

Seek Support

Seek Support

Talk to someone. The first step towards getting help for your depression may be as straightforward as talking to a trusted family member, friend or other loved one. Choose someone to confide in that you trust and are comfortable with. That person might know of resources for next steps or just be able to empathize with how you are feeling. Having someone in your corner is always a benefit.

Visit your doctor. If you have a family doctor, make an appointment. A doctor can consider your symptoms and help connect you with local resources, whether that involves talk therapy, support groups, or even medication. They can also help determine if your depression has a specific cause such as the death of a loved one, low thyroid, other medical concerns, etc. If you're uncertain about reaching out to a doctor immediately, check the resources here to help you make that first step.

Increase your social connections. In addition to seeking professional help and talking to your family, making social connections can help. Covid-19 has changed the way we interact with other people but as restrictions loosen, meeting up with friends in person is becoming easier.

Connecting with people face-to-face rather than online is good for your mental health. Building connections within your wider community can look like joining a Saturday morning group to work on your photography skills, meeting a friend at the ski hill for an afternoon, volunteering at your local food bank, or even walking your dog. Any of these activities, amongst others, can bring you into contact with other people and get you outside and moving around.

02

Improve Your Sleep Habits

Improve Your Sleep Habits

It's not just the length of time in bed that matters, it's the quality of your sleep. Whether you have been sleeping too much or too little, your mood can be affected by your sleep.

Turn your bedroom into a sleep sanctuary.

Your bedroom should be dark and comfortable without external distractions, such as a television. If noise is an issue, a white noise machine can help block out distractions.

Establish a regular bedtime routine.

While getting enough sleep is important, it is also helpful to stick to a regular bedtime and wake time, and not vary that routine dramatically on the weekends.

Don't start a major project an hour before bed. Use that time to start winding down from your day. You could meditate, read a book, or try some gentle yoga. Avoid all screens (phone, tv, tablet) as much as possible.

Improve Your Sleep Habits

Exercise can help with better sleep.

Something as basic as a moderate walk during the day can be beneficial to better sleep.

Get outside for some fresh air.

Vitamin D from the sunlight can help to regulate your moods. Sunlight can also help recalibrate your circadian rhythms, which helps regulate your sleep.

Stop drinking caffeine after lunch.

Caffeine is a stimulant that can interrupt your sleep. It can also be helpful to reduce or eliminate your alcohol intake. Alcohol disrupts sleep patterns and can result in waking up feeling less refreshed.

Improve Your Sleep Habits

If your struggle is with getting out of bed some simple steps may help:

Think of the simplest thing you need to do.

Get up for a glass of water, or go to the bathroom, or brush your teeth. Once you're up, it's easier to keep going.

Be proud of yourself.

If you manage to get up to do that one simple thing, be proud. When you are depressed, even the easiest things can be difficult. Simply getting out of bed is one small way you are working to kick depression to the curb.



⁵ <https://headsupguys.org/reach-out/consult-a-doctor/>

⁶ Brightside Health. (n. d.). 9 ways to improve your sleep to help with depression. Brightside. Retrieved March 13, 2022, from <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/depression/depression-in-men.htm>

⁷ <https://headsupguys.org/practical-tips/sleep/>

03

Increase Physical Activity

Increase Physical Activity

When you are depressed, even simple activities can be challenging. Don't expect to be able to complete a full hour-long workout at full intensity immediately, especially if you've stopped exercising entirely. A short, 20-minute walk around the block might be an easier place to start.

Find something you enjoy doing. If you don't enjoy it, it will be much easier to avoid it.

Increase your daily movement. If doing actual 'exercise' is more than you can manage right now, simple ways to increase movement in your life might include taking the stairs instead of the elevator, parking further away from the store, or getting off a station earlier on your commute and walking the remaining distance. Even just walking around the house can be a simple place to start. Building little bits of movement into your day adds up over time.

Make exercise social. Meet a friend for a pickup basketball game. Go for a walk with your partner. If you can incorporate some social activity into your exercise, it can make it more fun – and you'll be more likely to continue.

Pace yourself. Most importantly, don't expect to run a marathon or bench press 200 pounds right away – take your time.

04

Make Dietary Changes

Make Dietary Changes

Depression can cause you to not eat enough or to eat too much. It takes effort to make dietary changes, but even simple changes can help improve your mood and your overall health.

Start simple. Add some raw veggies or fruit to your diet. These take next to no time to prepare and add valuable nutrients to your diet.

Healthy snacking. If you're not eating enough or the thought of preparing a whole meal is overwhelming, simple, healthy snacks eaten at intervals during the day can help. Veggies and hummus. Cheese and crackers. A handful of nuts. Greek yogurt. Hard boiled eggs. An apple.

Make Dietary Changes

Consider your feelings. If you're eating too much, try to be aware of when you are eating only for comfort. Eating when you're sad, irritable, bored, or stressed doesn't make the feelings go away. And usually, the food choices you make at those times are not as healthy.

Be mindful. Try to be mindful when you're eating. Avoid watching TV, scrolling Twitter or working at your desk. Remember that you don't have to eat everything on your plate.

Make healthy choices. In general, you should aim to eat lots of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Drink lots of water. Reduce your caffeine and limit alcohol.



8 Mind. (2017, December). Food and mood. Mind. Retrieved March 13, 2022, from <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/food-and-mood/about-food-and-mood/>

05

Rebuild Intimate Connections

Rebuild Intimate Connections

When you are depressed, you may withdraw from your partner or spouse. Rebuilding that connection may take some time but restoring that intimacy can help resolve depressive issues.

Talk openly. To build or rebuild intimacy with your partner, you will need to open up and talk about your feelings, both in general and about your depression. This may not be easy but it will bring you closer together.

Be a good listener. Show your partner that you care about them and their feelings by letting them also talk about their life or paying them compliments.

Make plans to do things together. Go out for dinner or a movie. Go for a walk. Partake in a hobby together, or just sit and have a coffee on a Sunday morning.

Let's talk about sex. If you have lost interest in sex, talking to your partner is a good first step towards rebuilding that part of your relationship. Start simple – just a hug or a kiss goodbye can help. As with all good things, it will take time.

06

Learn To Manage Stress

Learn To Manage Stress

It can be harder to manage stress when you are suffering from depression but there are things you can do to help manage your stress levels. Lists, lists, lists. Something as simple as making a list of all the tasks you need to complete can help you feel more in control of things and less stressed out or anxious.

You can break tasks down into smaller pieces if the higher-level tasks feel too overwhelming.

Create some calm in your day. Deep breathing and meditation can help your body and mind relax when you feel like everything is on edge. Simply breathing in for four seconds through your nose, holding for four seconds and exhaling for four seconds can help. There are also apps and other online tools that can help with guided meditation and breathing exercises. Check out Insight Timer, Headspace and Calm.

Move more. Exercise can be a great stress reliever. Whether you go for a walk in a park, a run around your community, take a yoga class (one online option or another), or hit the gym, exercise can help release the tension caused by stress.

Learn To Manage Stress

Communicate, communicate, communicate. If there is a specific person causing you stress, communicating with them is important. Expressing what you think, how you feel and what you want from a situation can often help to reduce the stressfulness.

Manage your time wisely. It is important to know your limits and to not overextend yourself. Taking on too many commitments can lead to feelings of stress. Just because your neighbour can run a successful business, be there for family and friends, coach his son's hockey team, train for a triathlon and chair the community association does not mean that you must do the same. We all have our own comfort levels.

Journaling. For some people, writing or drawing their thoughts can be beneficial. Just putting everything down on paper can help reframe the things you are trying to work through.

Don't use unhealthy coping strategies. It is important to avoid drugs, alcohol, or gambling to numb yourself to feelings of stress. These 'coping' strategies will only lead to greater issues. Dealing with your stress head-on is the only way to reduce the feelings that make you want to escape.



9 Sharma, A., Barrett, M.S., Cucchiara, A.J., Gooneratne, N.S., & Thase, M.E. (2017, January). A breathing-based meditation intervention for patients with major depressive disorder following inadequate response to antidepressants: A randomized pilot study. *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 78(1): e59-e63. Retrieved March 13, 2022, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5272872/>

07

Grow A Social Life

Grow A Social Life

When we are depressed, it is often easier to remove ourselves from social situations. We may not want to be a ‘downer’ for our friends or we may just not feel energetic enough to get out and be with people. It’s important to remember that humans are social creatures and friends are vital to reducing our feelings of depression.

Start small. Connecting with others can make you feel more energized and help lift feelings of lethargy. You don’t have to start with an evening out on the town; it can be as simple as talking to the salesclerk or saying ‘hi’ to a neighbour when you’re out walking your dog. Connecting with other people, even superficially, makes you feel less alone and more like you belong.

Get out and volunteer. Helping someone else can make you feel better about yourself and improve your mood. A shift packing groceries at the food bank or serving dinner at a soup kitchen can connect you with new people while giving you something – and someone - to focus on other than yourself.

Grow A Social Life

Get together in person when possible. While it is best to meet up with people in person, there is a role for texting and other forms of online connection, including social media. However, the online world needs to be managed with care. Too much time online at the expense of in-person interactions can contribute to depression. Observing other people’s seemingly ‘perfect’ lives on Facebook or Instagram can contribute to your own feelings of depression or fear of missing out.



¹⁰ Steger, M. F. & Kashdan, T. B. (2009, April). Depression and everyday social activity, belonging, and well-being. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 56(2): 289-300. Retrieved March 13, 2022, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2860146/>

¹¹ Perlis, R. H., Green, J., Simonson, M., Ognyanova, K., Santillana, M., Lin, J., Quintana A., Chwe, H., Druckman, J., Lazer, D., Baum, M. A., & Volpe, J. D. (2021, November 23). Association between social media use and self-reported symptoms of depression in US adults. *JAMA Network Open*, 4(11). Retrieved March 13, 2022, from doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.36113

Resources

If you are struggling with what to do first, reaching out to talk to someone is never a bad idea. If you're in Alberta, there are many options available to you if you're ready to reach out:



men&

Call Men &'s Mensline
1-833-327-MENS
24 hours a day, 7 days a week
Get help and support from a
trained counsellor



Alberta Health Services has
many resources available,
as well as a dedicated
Mental Health Line
Albertahealthservices.ca



211

Alberta 211
Links to many helplines and
other resources available



Calgary's Distress Centre
24-hour help available
Phone or text 403.266.HELP



Edmonton's Distress Line
780-482-4357 (HELP)
24 hours a day, 7 days a week



(Southwestern)
Alberta's Distress Line
Call 403-327-7905
Toll free 1-888-787-2880

The rest of Canada: Crisis Services Canada can direct you to a local helpline.

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Take care
of your **mind**