

## One step at a time

Dealing with depression can feel somewhat daunting, as the things that help most are the things we find most challenging to do.

Although life can be hard, we must remember there is a vast difference in something being painful or being impossible.

Even though depression can be extremely severe, it's good to realise that recovery is possible, although it may not be quick or easy. Taking small manageable steps, like going for a walk or giving someone a call, can make a big difference to your mood.

Please read through this document to find ways of incorporating some, if not all, of the listed strategies.

### What are you eating?

The old saying 'you are what you eat' is true. What you eat affects your health, your mood, your energy levels and even your behaviour. The food you put into your body, quite literally, will influence how you feel both physically and emotionally. Making good food choices can help keep your body and mind healthy.

Avoid reaching for the sugary snacks and processed foods. These lead to quick highs and lows in your blood sugar that create feelings of restlessness and fatigue.

Eating a diet high in vegetables, fruit, whole grains, and lean protein can help control stress levels.

Try to limit stimulants like caffeine, coffee, and soda, and depressants like alcohol.

### Can exercise help?

Exercise, when you do not feel like getting out of bed, is probably not high on your to-do list. However, exercise and physical activity can be one of the best and most powerful allies in the war on depression.

Research suggests that, for some people, exercise can be as effective, indeed, in some cases, more productive, than prescribed medication at relieving depression symptoms. Continuing to exercise will also combat any future episodes that you may experience.

You do not have to join the local gym. If you're able to, begin with short walks around the block, 5 – 10 mins and build from there.

## Are you getting quality sleep?

Sleep disruptions are part of the symptomology of depression, trouble getting to sleep, difficulty staying asleep, gruelling getting up in the morning are all indicative of mental health issues like depression.

It is vitally important, for all aspects of your health, to achieve a healthy sleep routine. Going to bed and waking up at the same time every day, as well as getting the proper amount of quality sleep, will help you feel more balanced and energised throughout your day.

Current guidelines suggest that obtaining a 7 – 9 hour sleep opportunity each night is needed to get good quality sleep. Sleep opportunity means focusing not on how many hours *of sleep* you need, but how many hours you need *in bed* to get enough sleep.

Even a small reduction of these numbers can affect your mental health; sleep deprivation will slowly and surely chip away at your happiness.

## Alcohol and depression.

Yes, I know the first drink that we have can make us feel okay as it affects the part of the brain that looks after inhibition, at this stage, we sometimes feel more confident and even relaxed, don't be fooled.

As we begin to consume more and the levels of alcohol increase, we begin to replace the confident, relaxed state of our mind with the depressed emotional state.

Alcohol directly alters the chemical balance in your brain, the chemical messengers that transmit signals throughout the body controlling thought processes, behaviours and emotions.

Alcohol will suppress chemicals which boost brain activity and will increase those that reduce energy levels, slowly beginning to sedate you, similar to taking drugs like Valium, slowing everything down, you are becoming tranquillised.

And of course, alcohol interrupts those vitally important sleep routines. Do do not fall into the trap that suggests it will help you sleep; it doesn't. As previously mentioned, alcohol will sedate you not induce good quality sleep.

## **Friends and support.**

Overcoming depression on your own can be extremely difficult. Getting support, as tricky as this may be, can help you maintain a healthy perspective on life.

Depression encourages us to withdraw from friends and family; we begin to make statements like:

- They won't understand.
- I don't want to be a burden to them.
- They will think I am crazy.
- Who wants to be around somebody that's always sad?
- I feel ashamed.
- I feel too exhausted

I am pretty sure as you read this, you have probably reached at least five other excuses that you are currently using.

Depression is talking. And you have been listening loud and clear and reacting to all of this 'great' advice.

You haven't lost your abilities, your strengths, the things that used to make you tick, you've stopped using them. These parts of you have become silent, so, maybe it's time to start making a noise.

Reaching out for support is not a show of weakness; your friends and family still love you and would dearly like to help. If you don't have anybody to turn to maybe it's time to build new relationships, a new support network.

Remember friends:

- Improve your mood.
- Encourage you.
- Support you.
- Share with you.
- Trust you.
- Love you.
- Are there for you.
- Care for you.

Oh, and I do not mean Facebook friends, I mean real-life friends, get to see, share a coffee with, although, staying in contact via social media, is not a bad thing, it's just not enough to make a real difference.

## **Do things that you enjoy.**

Doing things you enjoy, or used to enjoy, are a significant boost to your mental wellbeing. Try to push yourself to do things even though you may not feel like it; the feeling of satisfaction will combat those depressive thoughts.

Doing these things will elevate dopamine levels in the brain (one of the right chemical messengers), and increase your feelings of achievement and satisfaction motivating you to repeat the process.

While at first, your depression levels may not change significantly, you will gradually feel more energetic, upbeat, lighter and able to cope.

Pick up on a previous hobby or sport that you participated in, try something new, go out with friends to the cinema, go for a walk. You will be surprised at how, being part of the world again, will make you feel much better.

## **Our old friend, the Sun.**

Have you ever noticed how being in the sunlight immediately makes us feel better? Well, let me introduce you to another couple of the brain's great messengers, Dopamine, Serotonin and also Vitamin D.

Sunlight boosts the production of Vitamin D, this, in turn, supports and activates genes that regulate the immune system, and the release of the neurotransmitters Dopamine and Serotonin.

Vitamin D obtained in foodstuffs such as milk, oily fish and egg yolks but to put this into perspective it would take dozens of glasses of milk to match the vitamin D that the sun could generate on your bare skin in 10 minutes of exposure.

Dopamine, in particular, plays a significant role in motivation and reward and as experience tells us, low motivation and feeling helpless are some of the main symptoms of depression.

As for Serotonin, there is a lot of research that suggests that an imbalance in Serotonin levels may influence mood in a way that can lead to depression. Serotonin referred to as the happy neurotransmitter.

## **Are you feeling isolated?**

When we feel depressed, it is common to want to pull away from others and disconnect. Depression leads us to feel removed from others, our family and our community.

Finding events to participate in can help foster a sense of belonging and allow us to feel purposeful.

Not only are we keeping our bodies busy, but our minds as well.

## **Do you feel alone?**

Depression leads us to believe that we are alone in our struggle, and no one will be able to relate. Find a trusted person to talk to about your challenges. Share with the most important people in your life the experiences you are struggling with and don't be afraid to open up in conversation.

## **Does anybody understand?**

Finding a support system is essential when we are struggling with Depression. There are a variety of resources available; both face to face options and online, that can be of great help. A community of people who not only understand but can offer tips and suggestions for helpful coping strategies can be valuable.

## **One last thing.**

***"Sometimes, life will kick you around, but sooner or later, you realise you're not just a survivor. You're a warrior, and you're stronger than anything life throws your way."***

*Quote by Brooke Davies*

*I do not claim sole ownership for some of the advice that you read above but do recognise the validity of all.*

All of the strategies listed have value, find the approach that works for you and IF you still require support to cope with how you're feeling then please either:

- Contact your GP or
- Contact Genesis Therapy