

Preventing and Treating Depression

What is depression?

Depression is very different from normal, healthy feelings of sadness. When you become depressed, your emotional distress changes, becoming more frequent, intense and intrusive. These emotions start to have a detrimental effect on your day to day life. The neurochemical “messaging” in your brain changes a bit. You start to think and behave differently. Your body starts to exhibit physical symptoms of depression. Depression can look a little bit different from person to person, but here are some of the most common symptoms:

- Prolonged sadness or feelings of emptiness
- Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness
- Feelings of guilt or worthlessness
- Anger, irritability, restlessness
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fatigue, loss of energy
- Changes in sleep patterns (too much or too little)
- Appetite changes (too much or too little)
- Chronic pain, headaches or stomachaches
- Loss of motivation or interest in activities
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Thoughts of death or suicide

I’m not depressed. Am I?

That seems like a funny question. You would know if you were depressed, wouldn’t you? Not necessarily. As a psychologist working in the Pain Management Clinic, I ask every new patient if they have been struggling with symptoms of depression. The most common reply is “No, I have chronic pain, but I’m not depressed”. However, when I describe the signs and symptoms of depression, many of those same people will reply “Oh. Maybe I am depressed?!” How is this possible? Well, depression symptoms tend to develop gradually. They sneak into your daily life without you being aware of it - until those symptoms seem normal. Also, if you look at the list above, there is a lot of overlap between the physical symptoms of depression and chronic pain. When depression symptoms are new and mild, people often blame those symptoms on their pain. As a result, we often miss the early warning signs of depression in folks with chronic pain. Depression may not be diagnosed until it is more severe, and unfortunately, harder to treat.

Why did I get depression?

Depression is not a sign of weakness. Depression can happen to anyone in the right set of circumstances. Young or old, rich or poor, men or women, educated or not. Nobody is immune. There are many risk factors for depression, including genetic risk factors, personality traits, past life experiences, social connectedness, your coping strategies and resources, current stressors etc. You may have some of these risk factors and never have had a bout of depression in the past, but suddenly a life stressor triggers the onset of depression. Long-term stressors (e.g. chronic pain, COVID-19) are more likely to trigger depression, in part because these prolonged stressors wear us down physically, mentally and emotionally.

How do we treat depression?

It is important to treat depression, sooner rather than later. We have great success in treating mild depression. Depression becomes harder to treat when it is severe, prolonged, or when you have had several bouts of depression over your lifetime. It is important to understand that we can treat depression effectively, even when that depression is triggered by chronic pain. Depression may be treated with medication, psychotherapy, or a combination of the two. We often suggest a combination of medication and therapy, as both approaches have certain advantages. For example, some antidepressant medications also help to reduce the severity of chronic pain. Medication and psychotherapy are equally effective in reducing the symptoms of depression in the short term, while psychotherapy often provides more long-term benefits, and can help prevent a recurrence. If you have any medication questions, or you want to discuss whether antidepressant medication is right for you, please contact your family doctor. Interested in psychotherapy? Although some psychotherapy programs are on hold due to COVID-19, there are several free web-based treatment resources available for those struggling with depression. Please see our resource list for more information. If you experience any suicidal thoughts, please contact REACH OUT crisis services at 519-433-2023 or reachout247.ca

Can we learn how to use therapy skills to prevent or reverse mild depression?

Absolutely. Psychotherapy treats depression by identifying what triggers and maintains your depression symptoms, and by helping people learn to respond in new ways. This diagram shows some of the ways that we think and behave differently when we are depressed. These changes make our depression worse and keep people stuck. You can learn to interrupt this pattern by using some basic mood management strategies. That means that you can combat depression and change your brain biochemistry by making small lifestyle changes each day. Seem overwhelming? Start with one small change and try something new every week.



1. **Monitor your mood daily.** Remember, it is normal to experience some emotional distress (feeling overwhelmed, down, drained). Here are some questions to ask yourself in order to catch the warning signs of depression. Is this just a down day, or have I experienced several down days in a row? Am I having down moments, or does it last all day? Am I able to boost my mood by doing something I enjoy, or does the down mood take over? Do I still experience joy and pleasure when good things happen, or do I feel numb? If your mood seems to be worsening, [Complete a depression screening tool](#)
2. **Develop a daily routine.** Maintaining a regular bedtime / rising time (even if you didn't sleep), regular mealtimes, and some exercise or movement every day has a huge impact on our body and brain. It resets our body's clock, improves sleep quality, and increases our energy levels and mood.
3. **Connect with others daily.** Folks who are depressed often isolate themselves, which makes depression worse. Call, text or email family and friends. Chat with your neighbour. Use videoconferencing to have coffee with a friend, dinner with family, or to read a bedtime story to your grandchild. Try Big White Wall's support group.
4. **Small acts of kindness** are a powerful mood booster for both the giver and the receiver. Send someone a note or a treat. Tell someone that you are thinking of them. Praise your neighbours gardening efforts.
5. **Actively look for 5 positive or pleasurable events each day.** Do you remember the Oprah "gratitude journal" craze? She was on to something. When you become depressed, you stop noticing positive details or events. Actively looking for 5 pleasurable things each day, and taking a moment to experience them is a way to re-train your depressed brain. It may be very hard to do at first, but it gets easier and more enjoyable to do over time. If you can't come up with 5 things, treat it like a scavenger hunt. Sit outside, or take a slow walk down the street. What do you see, hear, smell, feel? If we could look through a toddler's eyes - they would notice so many interesting things ...trees budding, the sight and smell of flowers, a bug, the feel of the sun or a breeze, a shiny car. Bringing a camera might help, as looking at the world through that lens changes your perspective.
6. **Schedule a pleasurable or joyful activity every day – whether you want to or not.** One of the early signs of depression is losing interest and motivation to do activities you enjoy. As you stop doing enjoyable activities, your depression gets worse. The reverse is true as well. Enjoyable activities help to turn depression around. If you can't do your favourite things because of pain or COVID-19, be creative and find new ways to engage that interest. For example, if you love baseball, but can't play or go to a game due to pain or COVID-19, find an excellent baseball biography or discover the best baseball movie of all time. Are you struggling to find happiness or joy? If you can invest a few minutes each day, Apps like Happify or JustOneMinute provide cues, tips and assignments to boost your mood. Can you commit an hour or two per week to your mental health? ["The Science of Well-being"](#) is a virtual course offered by Professor Laurie Santos, at Yale University, that anyone can audit for free, to learn the science of well-being and to engage in a series of personal challenges designed to increase your own happiness. Really excellent. I highly recommend it.