

DOMINANT SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

1. Loss of appetite.
2. Depressed affect.
3. Diminished interest in or enjoyment of activities.
4. Psychomotor agitation or retardation.
5. Sleeplessness or hypersomnia.
6. Lack of energy.
7. Poor concentration and indecisiveness.
8. Social withdrawal.
9. Suicidal thoughts and/or gestures.
10. Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, or inappropriate guilt.
11. Low self-esteem.
12. Neglect of appearance or hygiene.
13. Unresolved grief.

Many of us have symptoms of depression from time to time. Occasionally, the symptoms become so pervasive that a person has difficulty handling everyday demands at home or at work. If this happens, the person should seek professional help. Often, these symptoms can be mitigated by exercise, self-care, and getting support from close friends or a therapist.

SELF-CARE FOR DEPRESSION

Depression usually develops from several contributing factors including chemical, neurological, and psychological. As the connected paths of mind, body, and spirit all affect each other, it is useful to open up those connections with a variety of therapies. Whether working with a therapist or practicing your own self-care, the following mental–emotional–spiritual strategies can help bring those depressed symptoms back to a healthy balance.

Attitude

Attitude is the single most important factor to control in any healing process, especially in depression. If you feel helpless, chances are you will stop doing things that could otherwise relieve the depression. A hopeful attitude, or even a determined, stubborn attitude, will improve your health. While you may not be able to completely rid yourself of your depression, you can control it through attitude and you can continue to create a life worth living. The very first thing to do is to decide that you are going to take charge of your own healing process.

Next, consider keeping notes of your progress and therapies in a journal. You can keep track of which foods, which activities, which medications, even which people, enliven you or deflate you further. The more you know about your depression, the more powerful you become in managing your depression.

Taming the Mind

While the mind is a part of us that is affected by depression, it can also be a helpful ally in coping with this condition. But using your mind to reduce your pain does not mean that it is all in your head. Simply, the mind should not be allowed to run wild. It is a tool we need to learn to use and to control. We can choose to think positive thoughts and to turn our attention away from the negative ones. We can choose to remember positive experiences from the past instead of focusing on any disappointments or losses. We can daydream about and plan for things we look forward to in the future. Every day we can choose to focus on the people and the situations in our lives that make us grateful. When we select these ways of directing our minds, we reduce our inner stress, ease pain, and create more peace and joy in ourselves.

Self-talk refers to the way we talk to ourselves inside our minds. Most of us have a habit of being overly critical of ourselves and others. When we say negative things to ourselves, stress is created and depression can deepen. Pay attention to what you might be telling yourself. Here are a few examples of negative self-talk along with positive examples you could use to replace them:

My life is too painful.

. . . could be . . .

If I focus on one thing at a time, I can change things.

I always fail.

. . . could be . . .

I have done some things well and I can again.

I feel so guilty. I'm bad.

. . . could be . . .

I can make amends and forgive myself. I didn't mean to hurt another.

I'm too depressed to do anything.

. . . could be . . .

I can do one small thing today and feel a victory in that.

Listen to your self-talk and write down positive ways you can talk to yourself. Replace your negative thoughts with positive self-talk. Like any other habit, it takes practice to change. If you change your thoughts, you will change your feelings.

For more on Self-Talk, see the [Self-Talk: A Strategy For Change](#) page.

Active Imagination

We all know how easy it is to imagine bad things happening. Our fear does this to us all the time. But our imagination can be another helpful aspect of our minds. Consider that you could apply this powerful tool to reduce emotional pain and energize yourself. By example, when you are sad or empty, try imagining yourself in a warm, sweetly-scented bath. When you feel angry or agitated, imagine yourself in a cool, clear, green-blue spring of water. Try imagining the colors that represent the quickening energies of curiosity, playfulness, and light-heartedness. The more practiced you become with this technique, the more quickly you will feel changes.

Creating a Safe Place

Imagine and visualize a beautiful safe place, perhaps even a sacred place, that you associate with comfort and relaxation. It can be a place in real life or you can design such a place to your own liking. As you remember or imagine your safe place, it is important to feel yourself in this place, not just looking at it. To do this, you choose the sights, the colors, the time of day, the time of year, the sounds, the smells, and the textures of the experience. Make it as vivid and safe as possible. Then relax and rest, or explore this place to your heart's content. This exercise will help your body and your feelings relax thus nourishing your spirit and taking your mind off your distress. Most importantly, this exercise will help open and connect you to your intuition and your creativity.

Meditation

Meditation is a technique for quieting our minds. Meditation can reduce your preoccupation with your depression and allow you to get on with your life. There are many forms of meditation and many books on the subject. Experiment to find the ones that work best for you. Meditation can be as simple as counting your breaths. Try these and see which ones work best.

- 4/4 breathing: breathe in for the count of 4, hold for 4, breathe out for 4, and hold for 4. Repeat.
- 6/3 breathing: breathe in for the count of 6, hold for 3, breathe out for 6, hold for 3. Repeat.
- Breathe in a pleasing color and continue to imagine filling your body with it. Take your time. Enjoy.
- Breathe into parts of the body starting with the head and going down to the feet. Encourage each part of you to relax into the breath and to let go. Take your time.
- Do any of these for at least 10 minutes to notice a shift. Most meditation teachers recommend building your practice up to 20 minutes a day for a lasting effect.

Mindfulness Meditation

This meditation is particularly good for pain relief. Sit or lie down in a comfortable place and position. You can use pillows to prop yourself so you can be at ease as much as possible. Then close your eyes and notice your breath. Notice how the breath feels, where it goes when it comes into your body, what changes in your body occur with each breath, and what happens with the exhale. Watch and notice all the little details of each breath cycle. Continue this observation for the entire meditation. Each time the mind slips off the task, you gently guide your attention back to watching the breath. While 20 minutes is a very effective amount of time, start with as much as you can. Eventually, this observing skill can be applied to your emotional distress: watching it without any judgment and noticing how it, too, comes and goes—where each moment is a bit different from the one before.

Time Travel

Get comfortable as described for mindfulness meditation and then allow yourself to remember sweet times in the past: times with loved ones, celebrations, words of wisdom from a friend or elder, a place you visited and enjoyed. Filling yourself with pleasant memories is soothing to the mind–body–spirit. In a similar way, you can also imagine experiences you would like to have in the future by making up your own special, virtual reality. What places would you like to visit? What new skills would you like to learn? What dreams do you have for yourself, your loved ones, your community?

Spiritual Practices

Meditation in its myriad forms is part of a spiritual practice. By recognizing the spiritual challenge in working with your pain, you may also incorporate other spiritual practices such as prayer and asking for others' prayers; attending healing ceremonies, church, or a ceremonial smokehouse.

Holding on to guilt or resentment adds to mind noise, creates stress in the body and strain in the spirit. Rather, look for blessings and opportunities, the silver lining in the cloud, as a way of cultivating a positive attitude. Read inspirational books: *The Bible*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *AA Big Book*, stories of people who have overcome things or had remarkable healing. Watch videos on similar topics. Forgive yourself and others for the past. Do something for someone in your community when you are feeling better.

Your mind–body–spirit has enormous potential for healing and growth. You may be surprised by how much growth awaits you exactly because of your challenges.