

Anti-Depressant Behaviors

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Depression is a complex disorder. It involves many different symptoms, none of which is absolutely necessary for a diagnosis of depression. One person's depression may look remarkably different from another's. The causes of depression may be situational, biochemical or some combination of the two. Some depression is clearly tied to certain losses one experiences. In other cases, an overload of stress plays a significant factor. Sometimes we just don't know what has brought on this depression. The duration of a depression can also vary. For some, their depression may be quite temporary while for others it seems to be a life-long experience. Clearly "one size does not fit all" when it comes to describing a depression.

The treatment of depression may be equally varied. An effective approach to treating depression must take into account a variety of factors that may be helpful in alleviating these depressive symptoms. Medication is often one component to successfully treating this disorder. The intervention by anti-depressant medication may sometimes require only a few months of drug therapy before one is able to go off the medication. For others, the nature and severity of the depression may require them to be on medication over a longer period of time. Further questions about the role that medication might play in your recovery should be referred to one's physician.

Beyond the role that medication may play in treating a depression, there are a number of other ways that changes in thinking and behavior can have a significant positive impact on one's mood. It is to these "anti-depressant behaviors" that we now turn our attention. These behavioral and cognitive steps are things that any person can do which can reduce the overall negative impact of the depression.

Several categories of "anti-depressant behaviors" will be presented below. As you consider each category, and some of the specific behaviors listed within each one, please consider which behavioral changes will be most important for you to choose as you take steps to reduce the impact of your depression.

A. Physical Self-Care

We start with this category because often these become neglected, and if so, this can be a major contributor to a depression.

1. Adequate and restful sleep. Most people require between 6 1/2 and 8 hours of sleep to function effectively. When this is not received, sleep deprivation can be a significant contributor to a depression (in addition to being a symptom of depression). Sometimes sleep can be aided through a change in certain lifestyle behaviors, and sometimes medication assistance is required.
2. Adequate and nutritious diet. When you are not eating the proper kinds of food, your mental and emotional well-being can be affected. Ensuring

that you eat the right kinds and amounts of food is important. If you are unsure of what is a healthy diet, contact a medical professional.

B. Exercise

While exercise is another form of physical self-care, it is important enough to stand alone as a significant behavior to combat depression. Probably no other specific thing that you can do physically will be as effective in moderating your depression as engaging in a program of regular aerobic exercise. Pick the form of exercise that you enjoy the most (biking, running, walking, swimming, etc) and engage in this 3-4 times per week for at least 20-30 minutes. You may need to start out slow and build up to this. No matter where you begin, increasing your physically activity will help you feel better.

C. Making Relational Connections

Connecting with friends or family regularly is also important because we are relational beings. It is how we are made. Unfortunately, when you are depressed there is a tendency to withdraw and self-isolate. Being with people can help you think about something other than your personal pain. It also opens up the possibility to receive encouragement and support from others. And it can simply distract you, at least temporarily, from the pain of the depression. So connect regularly with friends. Call, text or email. Connect with family members who are supportive. As you take these steps to connect, you may be able to see beyond the pain and loneliness of the depression.

D. Finding Distractions from the Depression

Sometimes it just helps to distract yourself from the pain of your depression. Maybe it is doing something with a friend, as mentioned above. Getting outdoors to walk around may not only provide exercise but be a diversion from what we had been doing. The distractions that will work best for you will be those in which you especially find interest and enjoyment. Make a list of 15-20 things that you can employ to refocus away from your pain.

E. Developing the Attitude of Gratitude

It is harder to be depressed when you are concentrating on those things in your life for which you are thankful. But this requires that you be intentional about this, for it is not where your mind will automatically go when you are depressed. Write down 3 things each day that you are grateful for in your life, and do this for 30 days. To further the impact of this exercise, share some of these with a good friend.

F. Providing Service to Others

Depression is a self-focused disease. One who is depressed tends to have tunnel-vision that only focuses on one's pain. Yet if you can shift your focus to how you can help someone around you who has a need, you start to get out of your tunnel-vision. Look around you and consider who may need a helping hand with life. Offer to help, or just go ahead and do something on your own. Maybe it is formally volunteering with some community agency, or maybe it is just helping a neighbor or family member. But when you are engaged in helping someone else, you will also be helping yourself.

G. Managing Stress

All of us have stress in our life and we can't get rid of it all. But for many, a major contributor of their depression is that they have too much stress in their life and they are doing a poor job of managing it. The more effective you become at stress management, the better you will manage your depression. Perhaps for you it is removing some of the factors in your life that are causing a great deal of stress. Or maybe it is learning how better to relax and to use other stress management tools. Consider whether improving your stress management skills is an area that you need to be targeting.

H. Using Positive Self-Talk

We all tend to use negative self-talk from time to time. Those with a depression tend to have these negative thoughts running through their minds more frequently than others. The problem is that most of us are not fully aware of what kind of self-talk is going on in our minds. So first you need to **catch** yourself when you are thinking negative thoughts. Then you need to **confront** this kind of thinking, asking yourself how healthy or accurate it is for you to be having this kind of self-talk going through your mind. And finally you need to **correct** this thinking, shifting over to more positive and accurate self-talk.

I. Incorporating Spiritual Disciplines

Engaging in spiritual disciplines is another way of getting outside of yourself to connect with a transcendent God. This may involve prayer, meditation, Scripture reading, attending worship services or other forms of spiritual activity. Some may be done privately while other activities may be corporate. Recognizing that you are not alone in your life helps combat the loneliness that typically accompanies depression. It also helps to foster a sense of meaning and purpose that is greater than what you may otherwise feel in your day-to-day routines.

J. Enjoying "Green Time"

Research shows that our stress level decreases when you are out in nature, enjoying the creation of grass, trees and other "green things." Being outdoors gets you out of

your own home which can become a sort of emotional prison after you are there too much. So look for opportunity to walk in a park, go have a picnic, or even sit on your back deck looking at the back yard. Including this “green time” and communing more with nature is another way of getting outside of our depressed self. Even enjoying sunshine in a moderate amount, and soaking up vitamin D in this way also can lift your spirits.

These forms of “anti-depressant behaviors” are specific ways that you may be able to better manage your depression. While medication and counseling with a professional may be needed to fully resolve the depression, engaging in these specific behavioral steps is a good place to begin. And when combined with the professional services mentioned above, your depression should reduce more quickly and completely.