

Tool Kit for Beating the Blues

**Do you feel sad or flat most of the time?
Have you lost interest in your usual activities?**
If so, you might be experiencing depression.

What is depression?

Everyone feels sad or down from time to time. You can get the 'blues' through loss or disappointment, such as missing out on something that was important to you, or losing something valuable. Sadness or the 'blues' is a normal reaction to negative situations. These feelings usually lessen after a few hours, a day or two, or a good night's sleep.

Depression is a more persistent condition, which can last for weeks, months or even years. It affects not only the way you feel, but also the way you think and behave. Depression is not just a mood that you can 'snap out of'. Depression affects your overall sense of wellness and your motivation to get even the simplest things done.

Common signs of depression include:

- feeling sad or miserable most of the time
- losing interest in activities you once enjoyed
- changes in appetite or weight
- having difficulty in getting to sleep or waking early
- feeling tired and lacking in energy
- feeling guilty or worthless
- feeling lethargic, restless or edgy
- having difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- thinking repeatedly of death or suicide

How common is depression?

Around 15% of Australians will experience major depression at least once in their lives. Many more will experience mild depression. Depression is



nothing to be ashamed about. It is not a character flaw or a sign of weakness. Depression has been called the common cold of mental disorders because it is one of the most common problems encountered by mental health workers.

The following tips may help if you are depressed, or even if you just feel sad regularly.

Tool Kit

1 See a doctor

If you feel sad or depressed talk to your doctor about how you have been feeling. Some medical conditions, including hormonal disorders (such as hypothyroidism, lupus, Cushing's disease, diabetes) and nervous system disorders (such as Parkinson's disease, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis) can contribute to depression. It is important to know if your feelings of sadness or depression have a medical cause, so the best treatment can be chosen.

Your doctor may suggest anti-depressant medication. Medication can aid recovery, and it is particularly helpful in cases of severe depression. Talk to your doctor regularly about whether the prescribed medication is helping.

2 Make plans to be active

One problem with depression is that when you feel down you become tired, self-absorbed and

don't feel like doing anything. As a result, you may become inactive and avoid social contact – which makes you feel more depressed. This cycle means that sadness or mild depression can sometimes spiral into more severe depression.

Keeping busy is a good way to break the cycle. Activity helps distract you from your problems and turn your focus to the world around you. Over the next few weeks, use the following tips to increase your level of activity.

a) Exercise regularly

Just moving more helps you feel better. Think of ways to become more physically active – walk a little further each day, do some gardening or housework or climb stairs rather than use the lift. Exercise, such as walking, cycling or swimming, stimulates your body to produce substances called endorphins, which help you feel better, physically and psychologically. Playing in a team or joining an aerobics class can add to the benefits by increasing your enjoyment and motivation.

b) Do something you enjoy

When you're depressed it's easy to forget to do things that you like. Make sure you take part in activities that you enjoy. Make a list of things you can do: for example, taking a hot bath, cooking a nice meal, or buying a magazine. Try to include at least one pleasurable activity every day, even when you don't feel like it.

c) Congratulate yourself for doing something that needs to be done

Even when you're depressed things still need to be done. The fridge needs cleaning, meals need preparing, and the lawn needs mowing. It might not be much fun doing these things but when they're done you'll have a sense of achievement. Make a list of things you need to do. Choose one or two and start straight away.

d) Link up with friends and family

Strong, supportive relationships are some of the best safeguards against loneliness and depression. They can also help you to overcome depression more quickly. Friends can give emotional support, practical information, a different perspective and a sense of belonging. Just talking about your worries or concerns usually makes you feel better.

To develop supportive relationships you need to:

- Spend time with people (enjoy a chat and a cuppa)
- Make an effort to contact people (try to put aside any fears and phone a friend or relative)
- Do things for other people (help a sick friend or an elderly relative with their shopping)
- Be open and honest with other people

3 Look after your health

It is easy to neglect your health when you feel down and uninspired. Some people lose their appetite and eat very little. Others stop cooking and end up consuming junk food. Some people try to numb their feelings by drinking too much alcohol or taking drugs. These habits, in addition to poor sleep patterns (a common side-effect of depression) can make you physically unwell and lacking in energy.

It is important to look after yourself, especially when you feel depressed. Try to eat a healthy diet, exercise daily and avoid unhealthy habits (such as excessive alcohol, smoking, drugs).

4 Try to get quality sleep

Sleep difficulties are often a sign of anxiety and depression. Try the following techniques to get a good night's sleep:

- **Avoid napping during the day.** Sleeping during the day will make it harder to fall asleep at night.
- **Wake at the same time every day.** Avoid sleeping in to make up for 'lost sleep'. The longer you sleep in, the later you will be able to get to sleep.
- **Use your bed for sleep only.** If you do things like watching TV and eating in bed then your body learns to associate bed with being awake. You need to break this connection by only allowing yourself to be in bed when you are tired.
- **Make sure you are comfortable.** It is hard to sleep if you are hungry, cold or in pain.
- **Avoid stimulants before bed.** Nicotine is a stimulant. If you smoke, have your last cigarette at least a half-hour before going to bed. If you drink coffee, tea or cola, have your last cup before 4pm so the effects wear off.

- **Avoid alcohol as a way of getting to sleep.** Although alcohol may help you get to sleep, people who drink before going to bed wake more often during the night and spend less time in deep sleep.
- **Don't stay in bed if you can't stop thinking.** If you can't stop tossing and turning during the night, there is no point staying there and becoming more restless. Get out of bed and do something relaxing. Read a book or listen to calming music to distract yourself from your concerns until you become sleepy.



5 Try to solve problems that make you stressed

Problems are difficult to deal with at the best of times but when you're depressed they can make you feel like the weight of the world is on your shoulders. Use these guidelines to deal with problems in a structured way.

- **Identify your most stressful problems.** Keep it specific, for example, if you think, "I want my life to be better", ask yourself, "What is stopping my life from being better?" and list your responses, such as "I need a job", "I want to meet people".
- **Brainstorm solutions.** List as many solutions as possible, even those you think may be useless or even absurd. Use your imagination!
- **List the advantages and disadvantages of each solution.** No solution will be ideal. Even good ideas will have some drawbacks, such as requiring time or money you don't have.

- **Identify the best solution.** Choose a solution that is achievable. The problem may not be solved immediately, but you will have made a start. Don't forget that sometimes the best solution is just to wait and be patient.
- **List the steps you need to take.** The most common reason why solutions fail is lack of planning. Be sure to spend some time on this planning stage.
- **Carry out the solution and check to see if it has been effective.** Problem solving is an ongoing process. It is likely to take more than one attempt.

Facing your problems is not easy and requires energy and motivation. Sometimes this is hard to do on your own. Talking to a Lifeline telephone counsellor may help clarify the problems and possible solutions. Call 13 11 14.

6 Change unhelpful thinking

When you are depressed it is easy to think negatively about yourself, the world and the future. You tend to notice things that go wrong rather than things that go well. The way you view life is coloured by your mood, so that you tend to see the negative side. These negative thought patterns are part of the downward spiral of depression. Changing your thought patterns isn't easy but it is possible. These steps will help you become aware of your thinking so you can start to change it.

Step 1. Notice changes in your mood, especially when you begin to feel worse.

Step 2. Think about what has happened that may have led to this mood change.

Step 3. Notice what you were thinking at the time. Ask yourself questions like these:

"How else could I interpret this situation?"

"Am I overreacting?"

"What would I say to a friend in this situation?"

"How have I handled this in the past?"

"If I weren't depressed would I think differently?"

Step 4. Replace the unhelpful thought with a more helpful one.

For example, while reading this Tool Kit you may think:

"This is too hard. It won't work for me."

Challenge this thought with one of the questions above. You may come to the following conclusions:

"I'm just feeling tired so it seems harder than it is."

"Maybe I'm overreacting."

"I'd tell my friend that it's worth trying some of these suggestions."



are common when people feel very depressed. If you have these thoughts, it is vital to seek help. Call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

Step 5. Follow through with these more realistic thoughts.

"I'm feeling tired but I'll give it a go anyway."

7 Talk to someone

Life events such as relationship difficulties, past hurts and regrets or an uncertain future may contribute to feelings of depression. Find a counsellor, community worker, minister or someone you feel comfortable talking to. Talking honestly about your feelings can help you develop an understanding of your situation and assist you to move forward. To find someone locally, ask your GP or call Lifeline 13 11 14 for suggestions.

8 Will these tips be enough?

If these tips don't work for you at the moment, there are other options: talk to your doctor, a Lifeline telephone counsellor or a friend and discuss other ways you can get help.

Maybe you also have some thoughts of dying, that it may be better to 'not be around', or you don't know how much longer you can go on. These thoughts

Don't be surprised if you find some of these tips hard to do. Try starting with one and move on to others as soon as you can.

Useful books and resources

The Good Mood Guide: an eight-week structured self-help program. Available from the Lifeline Information Service for \$25.00.

Beating The Blues, by Susan Tanner and Jillian Ball (ISBN 064636622X, \$27.50).

Lifeline 13 11 14: for 24-hour telephone counselling and referral to other counselling options in your area.

Useful web sites

www.beyondblue.org.au is an Australian site with information on depression.

www.depressionet.com.au provides information, help, and support for people who have depression or are depressed.

<http://moodgym.anu.edu.au> is a free self-help program on cognitive behaviour therapy skills for people vulnerable to depression.

www.reachout.com.au is aimed at youth.



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