

# Stay Healthy

## 7 Ways to Fight Depression

Here's help for the one out of three Americans who struggle with feeling down.

By Kathleen McCleary

There's no one "cause" for depression. Your biology, your temperament, your early experiences, your current life circumstances—all affect the neurotransmitters in your brain and how they communicate, says psychiatrist Diane McIntosh, M.D., author of *This Is Depression* and co-host of the podcast *Blindsided*. "The worst kind of stress for your brain is chronic, unpredictable stress, and that's what we've all been living in during the pandemic," she says.

The good news is your neurotransmitters can be retrained. Talk with your doctor or a psychiatrist about talk therapy, medication and other treatments. And consider these small changes—all based in science—that may help.



**EXERCISE** "A 30-minute walk every day is enough to impact your mental health," McIntosh says. Studies have shown that exercise is as effective as medication or psychotherapy in reducing symptoms of depression. In fact, recent research found that people who did 2.5 hours of brisk walking a week cut their risk of

developing depression by 25 percent. Exercising even half that much lowered depression risk by 18 percent.

**LIMIT SOCIAL MEDIA USE** "Stop dread scrolling," says Adam Borland, a clinical psychologist with Cleveland Clinic. Last year, researchers found that people who used social media the most (particularly Snapchat, Facebook and YouTube) were substantially more likely to report feeling depressed than adults who didn't.

**FIND A MANTRA** Borland brainstorms with his patients to help them find a phrase that's easily remembered and that they can feel a connection to. "One example is 'I'm doing the best that I can,'" he says. "It's very simple—but very powerful. It's got 'I am doing, I am

active, I'm not just waiting for things to happen,' and 'the best that I can' is humanistic. We're not robots. There's something freeing about that."

**DO SOMETHING CREATIVE** "I've had patients pick up musical instruments they hadn't played in many years, and it really helped," says Borland. In a 2018 study at the University of California San Francisco, researchers found that older adults who sang in a community choir every week were much less lonely and more interested in life than a control group. A 2013 study found that guided poetry writing sessions were "significantly effective" in alleviating symptoms of depression in adolescents.

**PRACTICE GRATITUDE** Focusing on what you appreciate about your life and expressing it—either by telling someone or writing it down—can affect the serotonin and dopamine systems in your brain and produce changes in the reactivity of key brain regions that last for weeks or months, says Alex Korb, neuroscientist at UCLA and author of *The Upward Spiral*. In a 2015 Indiana University study, researchers found that writing letters expressing gratitude made subjects' brains more reactive to positive events, changes that could be seen in the brain even three months later.

**SLEEP** Changing your sleep patterns changes a variety of neurotransmitter systems, says Korb. "Sleep reduces your emotional reactivity and reduces the rewarding pull of unhelpful behaviors," like bingeing on ice cream.

**TALK TO FRIENDS AND FAMILY** "Talking about your depression can be giving the other person a gift," says Borland. "They might be dealing with something similar that they haven't been able to talk about. Mental health and treatment are finally getting destigmatized."

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