

A woman in silhouette stands on a beach at sunset, holding a cluster of red balloons. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm glow over the scene. The woman is wearing a dark, sleeveless dress and is looking out towards the ocean. The balloons are a vibrant red color, contrasting with the warm tones of the sunset. The overall mood is one of hope and optimism.

HEALTH
MEANS®

27 Ways to

BEAT DEPRESSION, NATURALLY

by HEALTHMEANS

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We all feel a little depressed at times. That's because depression is not an all-or-nothing experience. Depression exists on a continuum where we can be "not at all depressed" (on one end), "extremely depressed" (on the other end) or anywhere in the middle [1]. The more depressive symptoms we have frequently—symptoms such as sadness, pessimism, self-dislike, insomnia, loss of appetite and more [2]—the more likely it is that we would get a diagnosis of Major Depression [3].

Having Major Depression means that we have episodes of more intense, and sometimes debilitating, depression. Approximately 5% of the population is thought to have Major Depression at any time and 17% will experience a Major Depressive episode at some point in their life [4]. But even if we don't have Major Depression, our depression symptoms may still be bothersome.

GETTING TO KNOW DEPRESSION

Although we generally think of depression as sadness, depression is actually more of a syndrome consisting of many symptoms related to sadness. To get a better sense of your current depression symptoms, answer the following questions.

IN THE PAST WEEK, HOW OFTEN WERE THE FOLLOWING TRUE OF YOU?

(1) Never, (2) Rarely, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often, (5) Always

1. I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me.
2. I had a poor appetite.
3. I did not feel like eating, even though I should have been hungry.
4. I felt that I could not shake off the blues, even with help from my family or friends.
5. I was down in the dumps.
6. I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing.
7. I felt depressed.
8. I felt that everything I did was an effort.
9. I thought my life had been a failure.
10. I thought about killing myself.
11. I had restless sleep.
12. I felt lonely.
13. I had crying spells.
14. I felt sad.
15. I could not get going.
16. I felt fearful.
17. I felt that people disliked me.
18. I had thoughts about death.
19. I talked less than usual.
20. I felt hopeful about the future (reverse scored - high scores mean lower depression).
21. I felt happy (reverse scored - high scores mean lower depression).
22. I enjoyed life (reverse scored - high scores mean lower depression).

NOTE. *These questions are a public domain resource provided by IPIP.org and are not meant to diagnose any depressive condition [5].*



Reflecting on your depression symptoms can help you better understand yourself. Perhaps you discover you have fewer depression symptoms than you thought, or maybe you have more. Either way, this self-insight can sometimes provide additional clarity to help you decide how you want to move forward and whether or not you want to take actions to reduce your depression symptoms.

Luckily, there are lots of actions we can take to lessen the severity of our depression. **WE CAN MAKE SMALL BUT MEANINGFUL CHANGES TO OUR BODY, MIND AND ENVIRONMENT. THAT MEANS THAT EACH OF US HAS THE POWER TO IMPROVE OUR QUALITY OF LIFE.** But what, exactly, should we do? This eBook will review research-based strategies that can be helpful for reducing depression symptoms.

Keep in mind that everyone benefits from different strategies. Just because research has shown a specific strategy reduces depression, that doesn't necessarily mean it'll reduce depression *for you*. That's because research results are based on averages—the average person benefits from the strategy, but that doesn't mean everyone benefits from that strategy [6]. Some strategies also take awhile to have the effects shown in the study. So just keep in mind that *you* are the best judge of whether the strategies in this eBook are helpful for you.

LET'S LOOK AT SOME DEPRESSION-BUSTING STRATEGIES YOU CAN START AS SOON AS TODAY.

1. DO FUN STUFF

It may almost sound too simple, but one of the easiest way to reduce depression is to just engage in activities you enjoy [7]. Do fun stuff, like spending time with friends, doing outdoor activities, or going to events. Try to do other pleasurable activities regularly too. For example, if you like to cook, paint or play an instrument, then do these things more often. To get started, it can be really helpful to first make a long list of all things you enjoy. Then make a plan for when you'll do those things, or schedule them in your calendar to make sure you don't forget.



2. GENERATE MORE POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Positive emotions are a powerful tool for undoing negative emotions and the bodily responses that go along with it. Positive emotions broaden our thought processes and build on themselves [8]. They create upward spirals of positivity. That's why doing whatever we can to create more positive emotions is key to turning our depression around. So try to find those small moments of joy, perhaps by watching cat videos online or sharing a laugh with a friend—anything that brings you a bit of happiness can begin to undo depression.

3. SAY NICE THINGS TO YOURSELF

Using self-affirmations, or reminding yourself about your positive attributes, can help buffer the negative effects of failures [9]. So if you're blaming yourself for all that has gone wrong, try thinking about your good qualities, traits or characteristics. Maybe you're kind, smart, creative or hard working. Make note of the good things about you, and be sure to focus on these things as often as you can.



4. IMPROVE YOUR SOCIAL SKILLS

Sometimes depression comes from feeling lonely or isolated. Because improving our social skills can help us make more friends and have more positive interactions with others, it can also help us to reduce our depression. For example, we can practice asking open-ended questions, engaging in active listening, standing up for ourselves and keeping our phones stowed away [7, 10]. These strategies can be especially helpful for creating more positive relationships with others and minimizing the depression that comes from loneliness.

5. USE YOUR PHONE TO CONNECT, NOT DISCONNECT

These days we're on the Internet a lot. But we have to be careful, because it turns out that general Internet use is associated with higher levels of depression and loneliness [11]. That being said, some forms of Internet use can actually decrease depression and loneliness; namely, chatting with other people [12]. So limit the amount of time you spend online passively viewing content and opt instead to interact with others through chatting or video when you're online.



6. MEASURE YOUR MOOD

Tracking your mood for a period of time can help you better understand what you're feeling and why [7]. For example, if you track your mood and note what's happening, it'll be easier to identify things in your environment that trigger a bad mood. Maybe when you eat something in particular you feel moody, or maybe when you interact with a particular person you get sad. Being able to identify what's making you feel depressed is a key first step in being able to do something about it.

7. STOP RUMINATIVE CYCLES

Have you ever gotten stuck thinking about what went wrong in the past or worrying about what could go wrong in the future? That's rumination, and it's when your mind keeps running through things over and over in a cycle. Rumination is strongly correlated with depression [13]. So to combat depression, it's important to short-circuit these ruminative cycles. For example, try to shift your mind to an unrelated problem [14], do some other distracting activity or use self-affirmations to remind yourself about your good qualities [9]. These strategies can help you get unstuck.



8. TRY NOT TO CATASTROPHIZE

Catastrophizing is when we feel a lack of control and we expect negative outcomes [15]. We think we're helping ourselves by thinking about—and mentally preparing for—the worst possible outcomes. But it turns out not to be an effective coping strategy because these thoughts are difficult to disengage from, and they just end up intensifying our depression [16]. So if you find yourself thinking about all the ways that things could go wrong, pause. Remind yourself that the worst thing rarely happens and challenge yourself to think about some ways that the situation could turn out fine or even great.

9. TRY MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness involves awareness and acceptance of thoughts, emotions, and bodily states [17]. Research suggests that mindfulness, especially mindfulness based cognitive therapy, can help reduce depression [18]. This style of mindfulness helps to deactivate negative thinking styles (some of which we've just talked about in this eBook) and activate acceptance and self-compassion. To practice this skill, try to pause, pay attention to negative emotions, and meet them with kindness, empathy and patience [19].



10. “TALK BACK” TO NEGATIVE THOUGHTS



Many people with depression talk to themselves critically even though they talk to others in ways that are supportive. Challenging these critical thoughts can be helpful in managing depression. For example, you can look for evidence that your self-critical thought is incorrect and then look for more positive interpretations. You can also try role reversal by talking to yourself like you would talk to a friend [7]. By challenging your self-critical thoughts, your brain can start to try out new ways of thinking that can help curb depression.

11. NOTICE YOUR NEGATIVE BIASES

When we're depressed, we are more likely to interpret situations in a negative way. For example, if we hear an odd sound in the middle of the night we might be more likely to think it's a burglar whereas someone with less depression might think it's nothing [20]. This negative interpretation can apply to all situations in our lives leading to a lot of extra negative emotions. So if you find yourself thinking something is negative, pause and ask yourself if there might be another explanation that is a bit more positive.



**ASK YOURSELF
IF THERE MIGHT
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12. BUILD YOUR REAPPRAISAL SKILLS

Reappraisal is a cognitive strategy that can help us reinterpret a situation in a more positive (or less negative) way [21]. For example, when people say “find the silver linings” they are really talking about reappraisal. And this is good advice because poor reappraisal skills have been linked to higher levels of depression [13]. Luckily, we can improve our reappraisal skills with practice. **SO NEXT TIME YOU’RE FEELING NEGATIVE, TRY TO REAPPRAISE THE SITUATION BY THINKING ABOUT WHAT’S GOOD IN THE SITUATION (OR HOW LUCKY YOU ARE THAT THE SITUATION ISN’T WORSE).**

By regularly practicing this strategy you can strengthen this skill and reduce depression.

13. TRY EXPRESSIVE WRITING

Lots of research has explored the benefits of expressive writing—or writing about your most intense emotional experiences [22]. The goal of this type of writing is to let go and explore your real emotions and thoughts about past traumas and challenges. In one study, doing expressive writing for 45 minutes, three times per week for three weeks resulted in lowered depression [23]. So if you have intense emotions that were never fully resolved, this may be a good strategy for you.



14. SET GOALS FOR YOUR DEPRESSION

Because there are many actions you can take to improve depression, setting specific goals for how you will improve your depression can be really helpful [7]. For example, you could plan to work on one strategy from this eBook per week or month. You could even make yourself a little calendar to plan how you'll go from where you are now to where you want to be. And if this seems too complicated, you can always seek out a mental health professional to help you.



15. READ SCIENCE-BASED, SELF-HELP BOOKS

There are so many science-based, self-help books out there that can help with depression. And research has found that simply reading a high-quality self-help book can lower depression. For example, one study found that people who read the book by David D. Burns entitled, *Feeling Good*, resulted in lowered depression symptoms [23]. Other more modern books based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, in particular, are also likely to be helpful for reducing depression.

16. EAT HEALTHFULLY

You may have heard that the Mediterranean diet can be good for your physical health. Well it turns out that the Mediterranean diet can also be good for your mental health. That's right. Eating a diet consisting of lots of veggies, fruit, nuts, fish, cereal and legumes with low amounts of meat and dairy seems to protect people against developing depression. On the flip side, eating a diet high in fast food or pastries increases depression risk [24]. So if you want to fend off depression, aim to eat as healthfully as possible.



17. INCREASE GLUTATHIONE

Depression has been shown to be associated with lower levels of multiple antioxidants. One of these is glutathione [24], an antioxidant produced by our cells [25]. Although it's difficult to supplement with glutathione, supplementing with N-acetylcysteine (NAC; a precursor to glutathione) has been shown to be helpful for reducing depression in those with Bipolar disorder [24]. This suggests that when you're exploring what supplements to take to reduce depression, NAC may be one potential option.

18. EAT MORE ANTIOXIDANT RICH FOODS

Other antioxidants that have been shown to be low in those with depression include vitamin C, vitamin A and vitamin E [24, 26]. So it may be helpful to supplement with these vitamins and eat fruits and vegetables rich in these vitamins. Here are some essential foods to start with:



HIGH VITAMIN C FOODS INCLUDE [27]:

- Kiwi
- Persimmons
- Strawberries
- Broccoli
- Leafy greens

HIGH VITAMIN A FOODS INCLUDE:

- Sweet potato
- Spinach
- Carrots

HIGH VITAMIN E FOODS INCLUDE:

- Seeds
- Nuts
- Avocado

19. NATURALLY INCREASE SEROTONIN LEVELS



Deficiencies in serotonin (a neurotransmitter) are common in Major Depression [24] while higher levels of serotonin are often thought to improve mood and reduce depression. So how do we naturally increase serotonin? One way is to eat more carbohydrates because eating carbohydrate-rich food increases serotonin in the brain. Since sugar is not good for depression, the goal here is to eat healthy carbs, like fruits, veggies and grains to keep serotonin levels elevated.

20. EAT LESS SUGAR

One of the interesting things about mental health is that we improve it using many of the same strategies we use to improve our physical health. One of the most surprising examples has to do with sugar. Intake of sugar and sweet foods has consistently been linked to depression across several studies [28]. So if you're someone who has an easier time changing your habits than your thoughts, reducing sugar intake may be a great place to start when tackling depression. It could be an easy way to help you decrease depression symptoms relatively quickly.

21. TRY A KETOGENIC DIET

Although research suggests we should eat healthful veggies, fruits and carbs to reduce depression [24], other research suggests that a ketogenic diet—a diet with very low sugars and carbs—can also be helpful for some in reducing depression [29]. Research shows that a ketogenic diet reverses the effects of mitochondrial dysfunction, which is common in mental health disorders [24]. In addition, initial studies in rats suggest that a ketogenic diet can contribute to less depressive symptoms [29]. Although more research still needs to be done, a ketogenic diet may be a potential way for some people to lower depressive symptoms.

22. GET OUTSIDE

Getting outside and observing nature has been shown to decrease depression. Just being in a natural environment curbs stress, which can contribute to lower depression [30]. So get outdoors in the sun and fresh air, preferably around trees or other greenery.



23. GET SOME EXERCISE

Moderate to vigorous activity has been linked to a lower risk of depression while sedentary activities like watching TV or using the computer are linked with higher risk for depression. Aerobic exercise, in particular, has been linked to higher levels of serotonin, a mood-boosting neurotransmitter [24]. So when combatting depression, getting some exercise can be an easy-to-implement and useful strategy.



24. GO WALKING

Regular walks have been shown to lead to lower levels of depression [30]. Some suggest that three 45-minute walks per week is the right amount. But some research suggests that these walks should be taken with other people. So if you're not up for other types of exercise, opt for walks. They can make a big difference in depression symptoms [30].

25. DO YOGA

Research suggests that depression is associated with HPA-axis dysfunction. The HPA axis is responsible for regulating cortisol and our stress response [31]. So making an effort to reduce stress can be helpful.


One of the activities that has been shown to lower cortisol and reduce stress is yoga. One study found that people who did 50 or more yoga sessions across a three-month period showed a significant drop in cortisol while people who did not do yoga didn't have this same drop in cortisol [32]. That means that four yoga sessions per week could help regulate the HPA axis and potentially reduce depression.



26. DEVELOP BETTER SLEEP HABITS

Up to 90% of people with Major Depression report having sleep disturbances. Even among people who are not presently depressed, insomnia predicted greater risk of developing depression [24]. Given poor sleep is common in depression, it may not surprise you that getting better sleep can help reduce depression.

One effective way to improve sleep among people with depression is with cognitive behavior therapy for insomnia. This includes establishing regular sleep times, adjusting diet in ways that aid sleep, and changing thought patterns that can negatively affect sleep [33]. By implementing these healthy habits in your life you may be able to both improve your sleep and decrease depression.

A photograph of a woman with dark hair sleeping peacefully in a bed. She is wearing a light blue tank top and is tucked under a blue blanket. The room is dimly lit, with a bedside table visible in the background. A dark teal text box is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**GETTING
BETTER
SLEEP CAN
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DEPRESSION**

27. TRY NOT TO OBSESS OVER HAPPINESS

We all want to be happy. None of us wants to be depressed. And there are many actions we can take to grow our happiness and reduce our depression. But we have to be careful, because obsessing about happiness, or our lack of happiness, can increase depression [34]. When we frequently think about happiness or worry about not being happy, we are actually doing ourselves more harm than good. So try not to *think* too much about happiness. Instead focus on *doing*—by taking actions that decrease depression and improve your quality of life.



THE FIRST STEP

The science-based strategies presented in the eBook can lessen your depression, boost your mood and improve your life. The hardest part is, sometimes, just getting started. So challenge yourself to try at least one strategy today.

**HERE'S
TO HEALTH.**



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