

A Blue Print for Living Well with Depression

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Depression is a very debilitating illness which impacts a person's behavior, thoughts, and feelings. Depression can drain a person's energy, hopes, and ambitions making it exceptionally difficult and almost impossible for the person to feel like their days would be brighter. People who are suffering from depression have a desire to withdraw from others. They want to be by themselves because they feel extremely discouraged and think no one will understand their feelings. The frustration of depression can get the best of people. It makes them feel like they are down in the dumps and there is no way out. In a lot of ways, this becomes their new normal.

Many people will tell a depressed person, "Can't you just snap out of it, shake it off, or you really are not trying hard enough to pick yourself out the bottomless pit of depression." The people who are suffering from depression really do wish the process to rid themselves of depression was that simple. They would love to snap their fingers and feel 100% better. Unfortunately, the process of coping with depression is a much more complicated process. Depression is a mental health disorder which results in a person experiencing an excessive amount of sadness, lack of motivation, and a loss of desire to participate in life activities that they once found enjoyable.

It is normal for a person to experience some degree of sadness in response to adverse life events; however, when the sadness persists over an extended period of time and one cannot seem to pull his or herself together no matter how much effort is put forward, one is more than likely suffering from depression. Depression can be either mild, moderate or chronic. When a person is depressed, they really do not have the energy to get themselves together. Basically, they are so emotionally exhausted that they lack the necessary energy to accomplish simple tasks such as getting out of bed, putting on their clothes, or taking care of their basic needs. This is a good time to consult with your family physician or seek help from a mental health therapist.

An overwhelming number of people suffer from depression which can be caused by a major traumatic event in the person's life; for example, the loss of a loved one, divorce, getting fired from a job, or being diagnosed with a terminal illness. These life challenges can send a person into a deep pit of sorrow. The person starts to feel like all hope is gone. They do not see any light at the end of the tunnel. They begin to think, feel, and behave as if this is how the rest of their lives will be. Depression can be passed on genetically. The person may have a predisposition for depression because it runs in their family. The depressed person can have a chemical imbalance as well.

How Do I Know When I Am Depressed?

- You feel miserable over an extended period of time, i.e. weeks
- You have a loss of interest in the activities you once found pleasurable
- You have persistent negative thoughts, i.e. you are not worthy or no one cares about you
- You have thoughts that you would be better off dead than alive
- Loss of appetite that causes excessive weight loss
- Overeating that causes excessive weight gain
- Lack of motivation, lethargy, and no desire to be physically active

- Change in sleep patterns, i.e., sleeping all the time or not getting enough sleep
- Uncontrollable periods of crying
- Constant feeling of hopelessness, helplessness, or hurtfulness
- Distancing self from family and friends
- Unhealthy communication - speech is irritating and sarcastic
- Suffering from gastrointestinal complications (e.g. stomach pains, nausea, changes in bowel habits)
- Loss of interest in sex
- Excessive worrying
- Preoccupations with negative thoughts

A recommended blue print for living well with depression is to create your own customized depression wellness tool kit. These are things which can be implemented to assist you with alleviating and coping with depression.

A Blue Print for Living Well with Depression:

- **Stay Connected**- Ensure you reach out to others. No matter what, avoid the temptation to withdraw from family and friends.
 1. Join a support group
 2. Have face to face time with love ones
 3. Stay socially active even when you do not feel in the mood
 4. Speak openly and honestly about your feelings
 5. Schedule occasional outings with family and friends, i.e. lunch dates, shopping, the movies, or a walk in the park
- **Get Adequate Sunlight**- Lack of sunlight can make a depressed person feel even more depressed. Be sure you expose yourself to sunlight daily. If you are in an environment where you are not able to get the appropriate amount of sunlight, then you should purchase a light therapy box.
- **Practice Relaxation Techniques** – Relaxation techniques are a wonderful way to relieve stress, i.e. deep breathing exercises, mindfulness, meditation, yoga, and deep muscle relaxation.
 1. Read a good book
 2. Spend time with nature
 3. Watch your favorite movie or TV show
 4. Spend time being still
 5. Listen to your favorite music
 6. Take a bubble bath
 7. Spend some quality time with your favorite person
 8. Find things that make you laugh
 9. Be spontaneous
 10. Pray and/or Meditate
- **Try to Get At Least 7 to 8 Hours of Sleep Daily** – Getting the proper amount of rest is essential to one maintaining a healthy life style. Not having enough sleep can make you feel tired and moody, which in turn can have an impact on how you treat yourself and those around you.

- **Maintain an Active Exercise Program** - The last thing a depressed person wants to do is exercise. They lack the energy and the motivation. Staying active is a good remedy for depression. It has been supported by research that people who maintain an active exercise program are better able to manage their depression compared to those who do not. Exercising help reduce your feelings of fatigue.
- **Minimize Your Intake of Sugar and Refined Carbs** – Comfort foods will make you feel better temporarily but then you will crash and have no energy.
- **Increase Your Vitamin B Intake** – Lack of B vitamins can trigger depression. Complex vitamin supplements can be obtained by eating more citrus fruits, leafy greens, beans, chicken or eggs.
- **Take Omega-3 Supplements** - Omega-3 is essential to the stabilization of one’s mood. The sources for Omega-3 are fish such as salmon, herring, mackerel, anchovies, sardines, tuna, and various kinds of cold-water fish oil supplements. Also, you can get omega -3 supplements from flaxseed, chia seeds, pumpkin seeds, and sunflower seeds. Try to get at least two to three servings per week.
- **Control Your Negative Thinking** – When you are feeling depressed your thoughts can become very negative about how you see yourself, as well as the world around you. These thoughts can take control of your mind. You have to remind yourself this is your depression speaking. Simply trying to tell yourself to think positive will not be enough. Having negative thoughts can be so ingrained into your way of thinking that you are not even aware that it is how you normally think. Being able to control your internal dialogue of negative chattering in your head will require practice.
 - Examples of “Stinky Thinking”:
 1. **All or Nothing** – This is when you look at things in black and white where there is no middle ground (If I do not get hired, I am a complete failure).
 2. **Overgeneralization** – When you have one negative experience and generalize it to all your life experiences (Since I did not get this job, I will never get hired).
 3. **The Mental Filter** – When you overlook the positive things in your life and only focus on the negative (Nothing, ever goes well for me. Why should I expect anyone to hire me?)
 4. **Jumping to Conclusion** – This is when you draw a negative conclusion about any situation without any concrete evidence. You act like a fortune teller (I will never get hired).
 5. **Emotional Reasoning** – The way you feel becomes your reality (I feel like such a failure. I am not worthy of the job I applied for).
 6. **Shoulds and Should nots**”- This is when you hold yourself accountable to a strict list of rules of what you should and should not do (I **should** have known better than to wear pants to my interviews even though my supervisor said it was okay).
 7. **Labeling** – Taking assigned labels you have placed on yourself due to a mistake (I’m so stupid, I feel like an idiot. I must be the world’s biggest loser).

Once you become aware of your “stinky thinking” you can begin to work on changing your thought processes. You can do this by challenging what you are telling yourself in various situations to keep from internalizing these thoughts. Thoughts can become habits and habits then become a way of life.

- What evidence do you have to support the way you are thinking?
- Show yourself some compassion. Ask yourself, what would you tell someone you love that is thinking the way you are right now?
- Think of some other ways you can look at the situation? Do alternative thinking.
- How is your depression impacting your current thinking processes?

Having the opportunity to step back and realistically look at your situation will allow you to see how your negative thinking is impacting the current vision you have of your life. Being able to challenge your negative thinking patterns will enable you to have a more balanced view of your life.

- **When Nothing Else Is Working Seek Professional Help** – Do not be afraid to seek professional counseling when you are suffering from depression. A professional counselor will assist you with getting to the root of your issues. You might have to be prescribed medication to treat your depression. Once you start to take the medication as prescribed, you will begin to experience a change in your mood. You will start to feel a lot more motivated. You will have the energy to do things that once interested you. Many people do not like taking medication; however, let's look at depression like any other illness. Say for example you had the flu and the doctor prescribed you some medicine to get well – you would have no problem in taking the medications. Well, the same is applicable when you have been diagnosed with depression. What makes depression a bit more challenging is the stigma that has been attached to being depressed and the fact that it is usually an invisible illness as opposed to something physical that you can see. Depression is an illness and it can be treated.
- **Reduce Your Alcohol and Caffeine Intake** – Many people like to indulge in alcohol and caffeine as a means of coping with a painful situation. They are both depressants and are not a good combination for coping with depression. Alcohol and caffeine are psychoactive drugs which affect the way the brain functions and impacts the way a person feels, thinks, behaves and perceives things.
- **Keep a gratitude journal** – When you are feeling down in the dumps, it is very easy to focus on everything that has gone wrong in your life and the world. Having a gratitude journal will allow you to focus daily on what has gone well in your life. It will give you the hope to keep pushing forward. You will begin to see by writing things down daily that you have a lot to be thankful for you (i.e. the ability to breathe, see, get dressed, walk, touch etc.).
- **Forgive Others** – All of us have been hurt by someone and have hurt others as well. Sometimes the pain which others have inflicted on us tends to keep us in bondage. We so desire for the other person to feel the pain they have bestowed on us. In reality though, to live a happy and healthier life, we must forgive what others have done to us so we can move on with our lives. We are not hurting the other person by holding on to the pain; we are only causing ourselves more harm. Letting go will give you the emotional freedom you need to overcome the hurt you are experiencing. Sometimes this can take a while. The beginning of any journey starts with taking the first steps.
- **Don't Quit** - There will be days when you simply feel like the weight of the world is on your shoulders. You really feel like giving up. No matter what, do not succumb to depression. It will be tough and you may feel like you just cannot take it anymore, but hang in there. Exhale, take some time out, but whatever you do, never, ever quit! Tell yourself daily, "I will manage my depression and not allow my depression to manage me. I will live a victorious life". Know that you were built to last and you can take a licking and keep on ticking.

Do not allow others to make you feel "less than" because you have depression. Show yourself some love and seek the help you need. Know that you are not alone; there are others who suffer from depression. Look within your local community for a support group which you can become a member. This will allow you to be in the company of people who are dealing with the same challenges you are experiencing. Do not be afraid to seek help from a therapist or doctor who specializes in treating depression. Remember, you are not alone. There are people who care about you and who want to provide you with the necessary help you need.

Keep the faith and live well while managing your depression. The aforementioned blueprint to living well with depression is not an end all, be all list. These are techniques that I have found very rewarding in assisting clients with managing their depression. I strongly recommend you consult your personal physician or therapist when you are developing your own customized depression wellness tool box. Best wishes!

Conflict of Interest

It does not constitute a conflict of interest for the authors.

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