

Relieving Depression Through Lifestyle Changes

Taking care of yourself is good for everyone, but if you're living with depression, it can be an important part of your treatment plan. Adding self-care to your list of medications and therapy appointments can help relieve symptoms and cut your risk of a depressive episode.

"If you're not addressing things like sleep, nutrition, physical activity, and your overall health, it's hard to overcome the depression."

"Your brain is an organ like the heart. It just so happens to be an organ of thought, emotion and mood."

Claudine Jackson, who lives with depression, says positive lifestyle changes really help her mood.

"I just started to eat healthy and exercise and take better care of myself. I saw a big improvement."

Claudine also suffers from anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder stemming from being sexually abused as a child. She credits her new outlook on healthy life to one simple task putting herself first.

"When it comes to mental illness, you have to challenge yourself and you have to study your body. And you have to know what makes you quirk and what doesn't."

You'll also want to cut back on the amount of alcohol you drink if you're diagnosed with depression.

"Alcohol is a depressant for individuals and especially when used in excess, it can make individuals feel more depressed. It can also interfere with how your medications work."

Illegal drugs, caffeine and nicotine can also hurt your treatment.

"It's a form of self-medication."

Jim Hill quit smoking to help deal with his depression. He says cigarettes became an unhealthy coping skill and he felt better giving them up.

"It didn't happen within weeks. But I decided I would quit smoking one day. That was eight years ago, and I've never looked back."

Jim also eats healthy, cutting out things like sugar in his diet. And he exercises regularly. Both help minimize his stress level – which is a trigger for his depression.

"The release of endorphins that are the most wonderful natural drug your body produces that leave you with no foginess whatsoever but make you feel wonderful."

Exercise can make you feel better by easing your symptoms of depression. By being more active, you can also increase your motivation and reduce the isolation that often occurs with depression.

"There are physical, chemical things going on in the brain that are interacting with those parts of the brain that regulate mood. These positive things are doing something physical just like when you exercise you get changes in muscle mass, you get changes in the brain."

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Meditation is another technique that both Jim and Michelle Wojcik use daily to ease stress. Michelle was diagnosed with depression when she was 12. She struggled for years with feelings of sadness and self-harm, where she would cut herself. Meditation has become an important part of managing those negative thoughts.

“I do ten minutes of meditation every day at 1:00. That’s my schedule. I have an alarm on my phone that reminds me to do it.”

Mindfulness Meditation helps you let go of other things that might be stressful by simply paying attention to what you’re experiencing in the moment taking in your surroundings and current emotions one at a time.

“It can be a helpful technique really for a wide variety of different mental health conditions. Any type of situation where we could just close our eyes and kind of get into contact with our current sensory experience.”

“It’s really to be able to recharge yourself; to be able to recognize, ‘Ok, here’s a moment for me to just be able to collect myself.’ Kind of put away a little bit of the stress to just focus on me.”

Taking care of your mind and body are both crucial to managing depression, along with therapy and, often, medication. Your mental health professional can guide you to lifestyle changes that can help ensure your treatment plan works for you.