

Keeping on top of things once you're through the other side

It's very common for people who have had an episode of severe depression, to have further episodes. So if you have had a bout of depression and have got through it, it's important to look after yourself. Understanding what keeps you well, making a conscious effort to do those things, and recognizing the signs of becoming unwell, can help prevent relapse.

+ what you can do

Taking care of yourself

You can reduce the risk of relapse by:

- Continuing with medication for as long as your doctor suggests, even after you are feeling better.
- Identifying early warning symptoms such as sleeping problems, tearfulness, loss of appetite, increasing tiredness, feeling unsociable, irritable or anxious.
- Identifying risk factors for relapse, such as family or work stress, drinking alcohol, being socially isolated.
- Having psychological treatments if these are helpful for you.
- Reducing work, family and financial stress.
- Learning stress reduction techniques such as breathing exercises and meditation.
- Reducing your drug and alcohol intake.
- Staying physically healthy by eating well and having regular exercise.

If you want to talk to someone who can help:

Call the Depression Helpline on **0800 111 757**

Text The Lowdown team for free on **5626**

Or talk to your doctor

Make a plan

You might find it helpful to make a plan to make sure you get around to doing activities that make you feel better. It doesn't have to be complicated – sometimes even just making a list of physical and social activities you want to do each day, is helpful. Include at least one thing you enjoy, and one that will give you a sense of achievement.

Stay active

There's a growing body of evidence that points to physical exercise being effective for mild to moderate depression, and many GPs are recommending this as an option, sometimes alongside other forms of treatment. A lot of people don't want to take drugs, and physical activity can be a viable option – it's certainly worth trying.

The good thing about physical activity is that it's mostly cheap or free, and unless you have some kind of physical illness or disability that prevents you from exercising, it's something that can usually be fitted into your day.

You don't have to go to the gym or run marathons, any exercise helps – housework, using stairs instead of lifts, walking the dog, playing with the children. Be realistic - start slowly and increase the amount of exercise each day. You might want to get a supportive friend involved and do things together.

Check out Fact Sheet 11 on this topic, and visit www.sparc.org.nz for more information about getting active.

Eat well

It makes sense that having a healthy diet will improve your physical appearance and your general health, and this in turn helps to make you feel better whether you are depressed or not. While the research evidence about how nutrition impacts on mental health is not as strong as it is for physical exercise, it is known that nutrition can play a role in the onset as well as the length of time a person is depressed, and how severe it is. It seems that many of the food patterns that people have prior to having depression are the same as those that occur during depression. These may include poor appetite, skipping meals, and a strong desire for sweet and fatty foods. When researchers have taken a close look at the diet of depressed people, an observation is that their nutrition is far from adequate.

Without wanting to get too complicated about nutrition (after all even the experts don't seem to agree on this) eating a healthy balanced diet with plenty of fruit and green vegetables does seem to help if you are depressed. Avoid eating too much fried, high fat or high sugar food.

Some research has suggested that daily supplements of vital nutrients can be effective in reducing the symptoms of depression, and this is particularly the case for people who haven't been eating well. On the basis of accumulating scientific evidence, nutritional supplements may be helpful for managing and to some extent, preventing depression. Clinical studies have shown that omega-3 fatty acids can be helpful for people with depression. In addition to omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin B12, folate and magnesium deficiencies have been linked to depression. One to two grams of omega-3 fatty acids taken daily is the generally accepted dose for healthy individuals, but for patients with mental disorders, up to 9.6 g has been shown to be safe and effective.

Drink less alcohol

Drinking too much alcohol and using recreational drugs can make your depression worse, and can also be dangerous if you are taking anti-depressant drugs. See Fact Sheet 7 on this topic.

Keep in touch with others

Have you found that you are avoiding family and friends? Maybe you've stopped talking to them or doing things together? Feeling left out and lonely can mean your depression gets worse, or that it takes you longer to recover. So even if you don't feel like it, spend time with your family and friends.

You could:

- Invite someone over for dinner or takeaways.
- Phone someone for a chat.
- Send an email or text message.
- Visit family or friends.
- Join a club.

Sleep

If you are having trouble sleeping, either getting too much sleep, or not getting enough, it will increase your risk of getting depressed and anxious. There are a number of things you can do to improve your sleep – see Fact Sheet 12 for more information.

+ getting help

If you want to talk to a trained counsellor about how you're feeling, or you've got any questions, you can:

- **Call the Depression Helpline on 0800 111 757**
- **Text The Lowdown team for free on 5626**

They can listen to your story, and come up with ideas about what might help. They can also put you in touch with health professionals close to where you live, if that's what you want.

Or for more information you can visit:

www.depression.org.nz or www.thelowdown.co.nz

The Ministry of Health would like to acknowledge information sourced from: NZ Mental Health Survey 2006, NZ Guidelines Group, Royal Australian and NZ College of Psychiatrists, MaGPIe Research Group, Beyond Blue (Australia).

For more information and fact sheets visit
www.depression.org.nz