

# Staying active will help you through it

**When you're depressed, it can be hard to find the energy or motivation to get active – socially or physically. Even things like getting up and getting dressed in the morning can be a struggle. However, it's often the case that the less you do, the worse you feel. And usually, the more you do, the better you feel.**

## + what the research shows

There is a growing body of evidence to show that physical exercise can be effective for people with mild to moderate depression, and it's certainly worth trying, especially for those who prefer not to take drugs. It can also be helpful in addition to drugs or psychological therapy. Building in exercise to your daily routine is helpful for everyone, depressed or not, in maintaining both mental and physical health.

A number of studies have shown that physical activity can prevent or reduce mental health problems, mainly depression and anxiety. Studies also indicate that young people who are physically active are less likely to suffer from mental health problems.

Generally speaking, the evidence suggests that the more physical activity you do, the more you enhance your mental health. This is because:

- Mood enhancing chemicals are released into your bloodstream when you exercise.
- Physical activity improves your health – it works on your heart function and increases blood flow. It can help you sleep better.
- Activity helps you feel better about yourself – you feel more in control of things, and it can help with weight control. It also provides opportunities for you to have more social interactions.

## 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

It seems that longer-term programmes of physical activity are likely to be more effective for people with depression or anxiety (eg a minimum of 12 weeks).

There is some evidence that 60 minutes of daily exercise (not necessarily all at once) is needed in order to optimize mental wellbeing gain, but lesser levels also have a very positive effect, and the quality of the activity may be as important as how much you do. For example, high intensity aerobic activity such as running and weight training seems to be associated with lowered anxiety and stress, but more moderate activity that you enjoy, such as walking, will still enhance mood.

The important thing is to choose activities that you are likely to enjoy, preferably with peers, family and/or friends. It can be as simple as getting out of the house to take a walk for half an hour. Once you have built activities in to your daily or weekly routine, it's easier to maintain them.

## + what you can do

### Stay active

Physical activity is a great way to help deal with depression. But be realistic, start slowly and gradually increase your daily exercise as you build up your fitness. It's a good idea to have a plan, and include activities that you know will make you feel better, as well as daily activities like shopping, gardening and housework. Don't worry if you don't stick to the plan, but a lot of people find it very helpful to have one, and to follow it through.

It's important to check with your doctor if you have a health problem such as a heart condition or high blood pressure, which could make some kinds of physical activity difficult or dangerous for you. This is also important for people who are on medications.

### Ideas to get active

- Go to the beach or a park.
- Go for a walk, run, swim or bike-ride.
- Play a sport you enjoy.
- Take the dog for a walk.
- Go to the gym or a yoga class.
- Visit a shopping centre or the local markets.

### Do things you enjoy

If you are depressed, you may lose interest or enjoyment in the things you used to love doing. This is a common symptom of depression. But if you stop doing these things, you can often feel worse. At first you might not enjoy them as much as you did before, but that's okay. The important thing is to stay active and keep doing the things you used to enjoy. The enjoyment will eventually come back.

It's also a good idea to 'spoil yourself', and plan things to look forward to.

### Increase social activities

People with depression often withdraw from their family and close friends. This can lead to a cycle of increasing isolation, which in turn makes the depression worse.

People who are socially isolated have an increased risk of developing depression, and take longer to recover.

It's important to stay connected with friends and family when you are depressed, and to accept social invitations even if you don't feel like it. You can break the cycle of depression by getting into action and doing things you are likely to enjoy, and this can be more effective if you plan activities with friends and family.

## + getting help

### Talk to your doctor about a green prescription.

If you want to find out more about how physical activity can help, and what's happening in your area, visit [www.sparc.org.nz](http://www.sparc.org.nz)

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

### Get a Green Prescription

Green Prescriptions can be given to people under the care of their doctor or primary health care nurse, to improve their physical or mental health. Green Prescriptions have been found to be very effective for people with depression and anxiety. The 'prescription' puts you in touch with a person who will help you to find suitable activity options in your own locality, through sports trusts and other community agencies, and support you for a certain length of time.

If you do want a specialised programme developed, or have other medical conditions (such as asthma, diabetes, heart disease), it may be possible for you to have this done by a health professional with expertise in prescribing exercise for individuals with health issues. In some parts of the country, specialised exercise services for people experiencing depression and anxiety are available from clinics such as the Exercise Rehabilitation Clinic, at the University of Auckland. Ask your doctor about services in your area.

### Visit your local gym

Exercise is more likely to be effective for depression when it is tailored to an individual's needs and personal situation. Most gyms provide free memberships for a period of time, which can help you determine whether that particular environment is suitable for you. Furthermore all gyms provide various personal training services and options that can include home based training through to supervised sessions and group based activity. This can be a great way to receive some direction, support, and supervision for engaging in physical activity. Some facilities have trainers with experience in helping people with depression and other special conditions. Find someone who can help you that you feel comfortable with.

### Call the Depression Helpline on 0800 111 757 or 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](http://www.depression.org.nz) or [www.thelowdown.co.nz](http://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](http://www.depression.org.nz)