Living with depression

Depression is now the fourth leading cause of disability and premature death in the world. The World Health Organization has stated that by 2020, depression will be the second leading cause of disability and death after heart disease.

If you’re struggling with depression you’re not alone. You’re among 1.4 million working Canadians currently dealing with the illness. The good news is that depression is a treatable disease, often involving a combination of medication and counselling. However, like many other illnesses, you play an important role in lessening your symptoms and hastening your recovery.

The key is to begin slowly with a few small steps. They may seem small and insignificant at first, but they’ll soon make a difference.

**Step One. Take care of yourself**

Improving your mental health begins with improving your physical health. Try the following:

- **Eat a balanced, healthy diet.** Researchers in the U.K. found that people with a poor diet — one that was high in processed meat, sugar, fried food, refined cereals and high-fat dairy products — were more likely to report symptoms of depression.

- **Aim for eight hours of sleep a night.** Sleeping too little or too much can affect your mood.

- **Expose yourself to a little sunlight every day.** Lack of sunlight can make depression worse. During the winter, try using a light therapy box.

- **Take control of your stress.** Not only does stress prolong and worsen depression, it can also trigger it. Practice relaxation techniques, exercise, talk to friends, enjoy a long bubble bath — whatever works for you.

- **Exercise.** This is probably the last thing you feel like doing when you’re depressed, but it’s also the first thing you should do. Start small — just ten minutes a day can have a positive effect. Exercise helps ease depression in a number of ways, which may include:
  - Releasing feel-good brain chemicals that may ease depression (neurotransmitters and endorphins)
  - Reducing immune system chemicals that can worsen depression
  - Increasing body temperature, which may have calming effect
Step Two: Build supportive relationships

This can be a vicious cycle for many people suffering from depression. Isolation and loneliness make depression even worse yet depression makes reaching out for help too difficult. If you feel you don’t have the energy, are too embarrassed or just want to be left alone, remember that this is your illness talking. People who love and care about you will want to help.

- **Share what you’re going through with the people you trust.** You may have retreated from your most treasured friends, but these are just the people who can help you through this dark time. Begin by talking to one person. If talking is too hard, send an e-mail.

- **Try to keep up with social activities even if you don’t feel like it.** Depression makes you want to retreat, but being around other people can help lift your spirits. As your confidence and energy return, consider taking a class, volunteering or resuming activities you once enjoyed, such as playing tennis or hockey.

Step Three: Challenge negativity

Depression is about negativity — the way you think about yourself, the people around you, your present and your future. Challenge your negative thoughts and put a more balanced spin to them.

- **Treat yourself with respect.** Ask yourself if you’d say what you’re thinking about yourself to a friend. Challenge thoughts such as “I’m such a loser. I can’t even keep a job.” Yes, you just lost your job, but that doesn’t make you a failure. The reality may be that your company had to cut staff to reduce costs — in your heart you know that you’re good at what you do.

- **Cut yourself some slack.** Yes, you’re not perfect — no one is. Research is showing that people who hold themselves to impossibly high standards of perfection and who are extremely self-critical are more vulnerable to developing depression. For those living with depression, self-criticism can worsen their symptoms which in turn worsens self-criticism. Strive for excellence, not perfection, and set realistic standards for yourself.

Step Four: Enjoy yourself.

The cruelest aspect of depression is that it robs people of joy, of taking pleasure in activities and the company of others.

You can’t force yourself to have fun, but you can start pushing yourself to do the things you once loved to do. Even if your mood doesn’t lift immediately, you’ll gradually feel more energetic, enthusiastic and optimistic.