

Depression Self-Help Guide

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section One

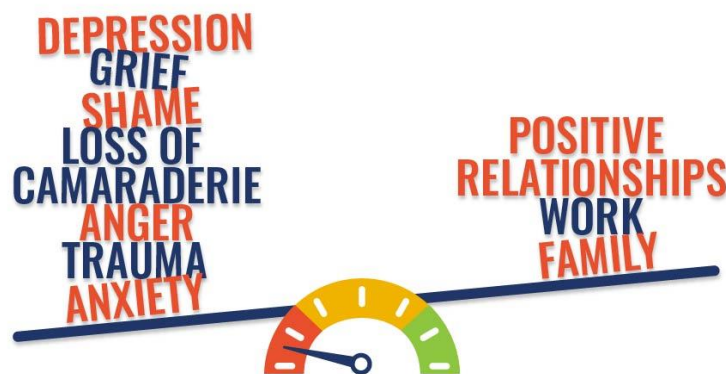
DEPRESSION: WHAT IS IT?

We all feel 'down in the dumps' at times, as clinicians we might refer to this as low mood. If low mood continues over a long period or makes you feel deeply changed, then this might be the sign of something we call depression.

Quite often, your family might be the first to see that something is different, or maybe a friend has pointed out that you're not quite yourself.

- Have you noticed that you're lacking in energy and motivation?
- Have you been avoiding friends and family?
- Do you put off doing things?
- Do you feel sad, guilty or down much of the time?
- Have you lost interest and/or enjoyment in things?

Finding your way to this page demonstrates a desire and motivation to improve your mood and take good care of your mental fitness. By following the strategies and tips on this page you are taking an important first step towards a more energised you. The exercises we recommend are helpful for both low mood and depression.



Self Awareness Exercise

Imagine, or better still, draw a seesaw. On one side place things that make you feel happy at the moment, and on the other side put things that are making you feel low. How balanced is it looking right now.

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WHY MIGHT VETERANS STRUGGLE WITH DEPRESSION

Depression might be only one part of the picture.

As a veteran, you may struggle with other difficulties too. For example, many veterans with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) also experience painful memories, sleep problems and difficulties with alcohol or drugs.

Depression doesn't always have a clear trigger. In many cases depression develops due to a collection of experiences.

These experiences might have happened during your military service, before or after leaving. Leaving the military can be a major adjustment that sometimes contributes to the difficulties veterans experience.

Depression might be linked to difficult memories. Old memories can surface years later, after the event happened, changing how you feel. Many veterans describe how these memories can literally "jump up and bite you". It might feel like your thoughts are racing or that you will lose control or go mad. We understand and we're here to help.

Section 2

It will take ~5 minutes to work through Section Two

How does depression affect you?

It can be hard to recognise when you are feeling depressed. Here's a few signs to help you identify it.

Thinking

Depression can change how you think. It can make you think that everything is awful.

It can be like seeing life through dark gloomy glasses.

- You might give yourself a hard time
- You might be focusing on the stuff you don't like
- You might think others judge you

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- You might be focusing on the worst things about the world

Before moving on, note down some of the ways your thoughts focus on the negatives about you, others or the future.

Doing

We all have things that we want to do, depression is like a heavy weight holding us back. It can make tasks feel near to impossible.

- You might be keeping away from other people
- You might have stopped doing things you used to enjoy
- You might be taking less care of yourself

Before moving on, note down some of the things that you were doing that you no longer are because of feeling weighed down or blocked by depression.

Feeling

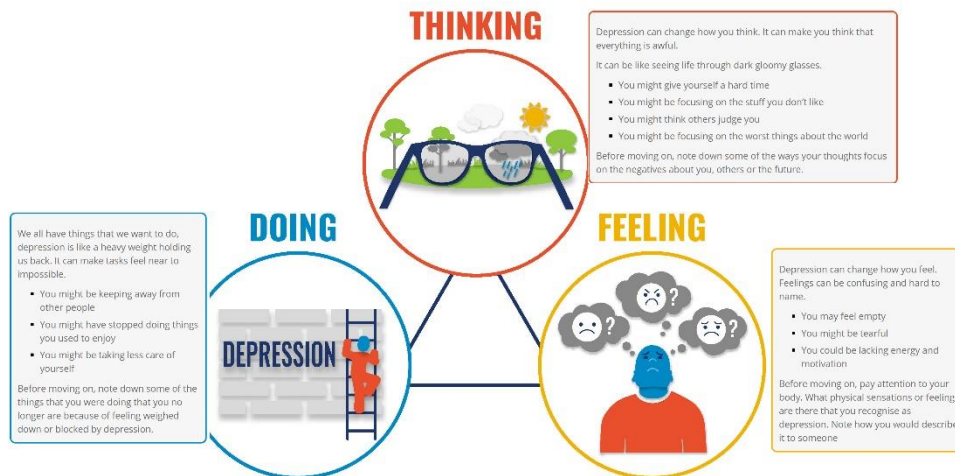
Depression can change how you feel. Feelings can be confusing and hard to name.

- You may feel empty
- You might be tearful
- You could be lacking energy and motivation

Before moving on, pay attention to your body. What physical sensations or feelings are there that you recognise as depression. Note how you would describe it to someone

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How does DEPRESSION affect you?



Section 3

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Three

What can you do about it?

The following sections will offer you some helpful strategies to get you started. The most important thing is to give each one of these a try and remain open to testing new things out.

We recommend you try the strategies for a couple of weeks, at least, before you are really going to know if they help or not.

The recommended strategies include:

- The thinking part (Get your thinking straight)
- The doing part (activation)
- What your body needs (Listen to your body)

To begin, read the rest of this section 'Get your thinking straight' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, move on to Section Four: The Doing Part

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Get your thinking straight

Give yourself a break!

It is important to highlight that you, as a veteran are incredibly well equipped to manage all sorts of difficulties. Routine, tasks, camaraderie, humour, focusing on what can be done rather than what cannot and the ability to improvise, adapt and overcome are all qualities that can help your battle with feeling low.

It is common for veterans to be highly self-critical when things don't go the way they 'should'. Being kind to yourself is an important part of learning how to balance and improve your mood. Self-care activities are strongly linked to improving well-being and confidence so take time to yourself, to treat yourself, to unwind, and to look after your appearance.

Inner Critic

Try drawing out your inner critic – consider what your inner critic would look like as a character or animation. Would it be a comical NCO or Officer, a monster or a clown? By putting an image to your critic, you can change how you feel about it. Try choosing something funny for example, that will make you laugh the next time you notice your inner critic having a go.



Squash Rumination

What is ruminating?

Ruminating is when something gets stuck in our head and goes round and round in circles like a hamster in a wheel but nothing new is in our mind. We become like a stuck record and this makes us feel worse.

Try the 2 minute rule:

- When you notice that you are ruminating
- Spend 2 minutes allowing yourself to continue ruminating

At the end of the 2 minutes ask yourself:

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- Do I know anything new about this situation that I didn't know before? Did anything change?
- Do I feel any less anxious or stressed about it?

If the answer is no, then get up, move and do an activity to move your brain away to another direction and try to leave it behind. Try engaging in an alternative coping behaviour or engaging activity, like going for a run or making yourself an egg banjo.

Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

Section 4

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Four

Do what matters

The following sections will offer you some helpful strategies to get you started. The most important thing is to give each one of these a try and remain open to testing new things out.

We recommend you try the strategies for a couple of weeks, at least, before you are really going to know if they help or not.

The recommended strategies include:

- The thinking part (Get your thinking straight)
- The doing part (activation)
- What your body needs (Listen to your body)

To begin, read the rest of this section 'The doing part' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, move on to Section Five: Listen to your body

The doing part

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Do things that make you feel good and find your flow

Flow is experienced when doing an activity that is enjoyable, energising, fully immersive and is just the right level of challenge. That might feel hard to begin with and the reward might not be immediate but stick with it and soon you will start to feel better.

Remember your 7 P's and get prepping. Try using the following chart to help you think of what activities will benefit you the most:

- See the Behavioural Activation Worksheet

The daily activities you do have great power.

As well as providing routine, structure, and purpose, they define who you are, who you want to become and how you feel about yourself.

What activities can you do that are really stimulating and get you in the 'zone'? Yoga, art, cooking, running, creating music, learning a language, singing, coding?

Can you try a new activity or re-start something you have previous enjoyed?

Keep structure, routine and balance.

Think about the balance in your life and aim to do at least one activity every day that falls into these categories:



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Section 5

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Listen to your body

The following sections will offer you some helpful strategies to get you started. The most important thing is to give each one of these a try and remain open to testing new things out.

We recommend you try the strategies for a couple of weeks, at least, before you are really going to know if they help or not.

The recommended strategies include:

- The thinking part (Get your thinking straight)
- The doing part (activation)
- What your body needs (Listen to your body)

To begin, read the rest of this section 'Listen to your body' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, review how you feel, go back to previous methods, and take the time to notice any changes in yourself as you begin to implement this final stage of the resource.

What your body needs

Oxytocin

Oxytocin is a hormone that we all have and need. It is produced when we feel physical and/or emotionally connected to others. It makes us feel good! The more connected we feel to others (as well as pets, wildlife and nature) the more oxytocin is produced and the happier we feel – it is a great antidote for feeling depressed. Here are a few examples of how you can get your daily dose of oxytocin:



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- Playing with the dog
- Hugs, holding hands, being tactile with friends and family
- Socialise. Call, text, email, write and visit those important to you. Be connected
- Giving and receiving praise and compliments
- Make a journal or scrap book of fond memories shared with others

Serotonin

Serotonin is the body's natural mood stabiliser. Increasing serotonin improves our mood. Anti-depressant medication often works by stopping serotonin from being reabsorbed thereby boosting their levels in the brain. The great news is, there are several ways we can naturally boost serotonin levels:



- Meditation
- Jogging and other light cardio exercise
- Being outdoors in natural sunlight
- Walking in nature

Dopamine

Dopamine is the body's reward chemical. When dopamine is produced, we feel energised, interested and determined. It is a natural motivator and another great antidote to feeling depressed. There are several things you can do to naturally increase your dopamine levels:



Eat good wholesome and tasty food. Really pay attention to what you eat and get the most out of every bite. Eat well and your energy levels will increase, you will feel less lethargic and your confidence will be lifted.

Celebrate your achievements and successes, no matter how small they may seem. Be proud.

Take time to care for you! Shower, bathe and take care of your appearance. Get a haircut, have a shave. Find a new fragrance, moisturise. The simple act of taking a shower and grooming oneself can lift our mood and our confidence.

Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

Additional recommended reading

- Skills Diary
- Sensory Snacks

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Section 6

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section Six

How have your feelings changed?

Have you noticed any changes in your mood?

- Are you noticing any differences?
- Has anything shifted?
- What helped?

Has your seesaw changed?

Go back to your seesaw again now you're finishing this resource and see how it may have changed.

Have you noticed it is now more balanced, or even tipping slightly more in the opposite direction?

Don't forget to keep checking back in with your seesaw and ensure you're still applying everything you've learnt to keep your mood more positive.

What to do next?

Before moving on to your next resource, it's important you take time to reflect on what you've learnt here and take time to implement your new methods. Give yourself time to adjust to your 'new normal' before moving on.

What to do if I'm still feeling depressed?

It might take some time to start reaping the rewards of your efforts. As with any new skill, keep at it and you will find it easier to use these skills when you need them. While these resources aim to give you some tools to manage your difficulties in-the-moment, for many of you this will only be the beginning. With this in mind, Combat Stress also provides specialist treatment programmes to help you tackle the past and take on the future. If you would like to know more, you will find the details of our 24-hour helpline below.

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How do I know what resource to do next?

You may remember when you first began these self-help guides, you filled out a questionnaire. This questionnaire enables us to guide you to the resources that will be most helpful to you. You'll find links to other guides in this series at <https://selfhelp.combatstress.org.uk/>

Is there someone I can contact if I need more help or information?

If you're a veteran and need to talk to someone, or you're a family member/carer worried about the mental health of a loved one who has served, please call our Helpline.

The Combat Stress 24-hour Helpline provides free confidential advice and support to veterans and their families. Don't struggle in silence.

Call 0800 138 1619

Are there any other resources that may help me?

Veterans' Gateway website - <https://www.veteransgateway.org.uk/>

VA Mobile Apps - <https://www.myhealth.va.gov/mhv-portal-web/mobile-apps>

You've completed the Depression self-help guide.

Well done!

We hope you've found this resource to be helpful and can begin to notice some changes. Make sure you take a break before beginning your next resource. We recommend waiting two weeks before moving on.

This information was publishing on 30 October 2020.

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