

9 Activities to Ease Depression

Certain pursuits can lift your mood and restore your sense of well-being.



By [Lisa Esposito](#), Staff Writer June 17, 2020, at 9:00 a.m.

This article is based on reporting that features [expert sources](#).

Activities to Help Fight Depression

WHEN YOU'RE FEELING depressed, making an effort to be active is easier said than done. Even so, activity can go a long way toward easing negative [moods](#) or living well with a [depression diagnosis](#). Sometimes, the challenge is finding pastimes that appeal to you.



(GETTY IMAGES)

Different activities satisfy different aspects of emotional wellness. Many overlap to fill multiple needs. Qualities of helpful activities typically fall into one or more of these categories:

- Physical.
- Mindful.
- Restful.
- Structured/task-oriented.
- Social.

- Spiritual.
- Nature-related.
- Creative or artistic.
- Therapeutic.

9 Activity Types to Relieve Depression

"We do not ever have to be passive or lose our sense of agency," says Anita Gadhia-Smith, a psychotherapist who practices in the District of Columbia and suburban Maryland. "There's always something we can do for our lives that is constructive and that will bear fruit."

1. Exercise.

Among activities, "regular morning exercise has the greatest impact on depression," Gadhia-Smith says. "It changes the brain chemistry and bodily functions, and elevates mood. There have been studies that indicate that, for some people, the benefits of regular morning exercise outweigh the benefits of medication." Choose among [exercises](#) like these – and feel free to cross-train:

- Brisk walking.
- Jogging.
- Weight training.
- Water aerobics.
- Swimming.
- Dancing.
- Treadmill or elliptical use.

"Exercise does not have to be laborious or difficult," Gadhia-Smith notes. "Do something that you enjoy and try to do it every day, or at least five days a week for an hour a day."

Outdoor exercise combines at least two depression-resistant aspects – physical activity and nature. Incorporate these "green" activities to help lift depression:

- Biking.
- [Hiking](#).
- Fitness trails.
- Paddleboarding.
- Kayaking.

- Rock climbing.
- Skiing.
- Tennis.

Regular exercise of any intensity provides protection against developing future depression, according to a large, long-term [study](#) of nearly 34,000 adults who were followed for more than a decade, published in the January 2018 issue of the American Journal of Psychiatry.

2. Mindfulness.

"There has been increasing evidence that mindfulness meditation – or the ability to pay attention to one's body, thoughts and emotions in a nonjudgmental way – can have an antidepressant effect," says Richard Davidson, a professor of psychology and psychiatry and founder of the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. "The idea is that just like physical exercise builds muscle, we can build our mental muscles to become more aware and calm in the faces of challenges and stress." Try these activities to get in touch with your inner self:

- [Yoga](#).
- Meditation.
- Breathing exercises.
- Keeping a journal.

"Depression is a complex stress-related disorder, so the thinking and approaches for preventing and treating and preventing depression can also include strategies for reducing stress," Davidson says. That could mean minimizing physical stress by getting enough sleep, eating well and exercising, he adds, or finding ways to reduce your mental stress.

3. Rest.

Sleep and rest are actually depression-prevention activities. "If you can regulate your sleep, your mood, hormones, appetite and energy level will be optimized," Gadhia-Smith says. "This means going to bed at the same time every night and waking up at roughly the same time every day, regardless of whether it is a weekday or weekend."

Take these steps to improve [sleep](#) quality and reduce depression:

- Set a sleep routine.

- Dim lights, unplug and wind down before bedtime.
- Avoid late-day or evening caffeine.
- Sleep in a cool, uncluttered environment.

4. Task and structure.

Sticking to a routine, getting organized and reducing chaos in your environment can make you feel better. Patients frequently tell Gadhia-Smith that adding structure to their day helps alleviate their depression. Performing concrete tasks like household chores may reset your mind and pull you out of a dark mood:

- Houseclean.
- Reorganize closets.
- Pay monthly bills.
- Update calendars and to-do lists.

5. Social interaction.

"Savoring positive experiences – like that morning cup of coffee or laughing with a friend or family member – is another way to boost your mood," Davidson says. Here are just a few ways to connect with people who make you feel more optimistic:

- Visit a friend or family member.
- Grab lunch or get together for dinner.
- Enjoy a ballgame or show.
- Stay in touch by phone.
- Meet virtually via video call.

"Social connection is a basic need," Gadhia-Smith says. "We are pack animals and we need to be with each other."

6. Nature.

Communing with nature, whether or not while working out, can ease depression. A March 2017 comparison [study](#) found that natural sounds produced brainwave patterns similar to those seen with restful experiences – like daydreaming – in participants. Man-made sounds – like a whirring blender – produced brainwave patterns seen in mental states related to anxiety and depression.

Relax your mind with gentle, nature-based activities like these:

- Walking in the woods.
- Strolling on the beach.
- Gardening.
- Bird-watching.
- Picnicking in the park.

7. Spirituality.

Having a spiritual life alleviates depression for some patients, Gadhia-Smith says. Deriving comfort and strength from your faith can help put problems in perspective and foster hopefulness. A 2018 [research review](#) of 23 studies found a positive correlation between religious behaviors and improvement of depression symptoms.

Spiritual practices to ease depression include:

- Prayer.
- Engaging with a faith community.
- Attending religious services.
- Meditating.
- Connecting with nature.

8. Creativity.

Creative pursuits can help counter depression, either through programs like art or music therapy or done informally on your own. Adult coloring isn't just for fun: In a small 2017 [study](#), young women assigned to a coloring group had significantly fewer depression symptoms afterwards, unlike participants assigned to work on logic puzzles. Many studies show that music is effective for easing depression, with evidence emerging on the mood-lifting ability of arts and crafts.

Try these creative activities:

- Playing or listening to music.
- Coloring or doodling.
- Painting.
- Pottery-making.

9. Therapy.

Sometimes, seeking [therapy](#) is the best activity for warding off depression.

"Specifically for depression, talk therapy as well as physical exercise can be powerful and are well-studied," Davidson says. Talk therapies like these are backed by evidence for their benefits against depression:

- **Cognitive behavioral therapy** helps you change how you think and behave.
- **Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy** combines mindfulness meditation and CBT.
- **Interpersonal therapy** involves a series of one-on-one or group therapy sessions.

Keep in mind: Talk therapy and other activities aren't always enough to prevent or improve depression. If you're suffering from ongoing depression, your doctor may suggest treatment with antidepressant medication.

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Sources

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