

## Why Depression Keeps Coming Back, and How to Prevent It

If you've had depression before, you know what a horrible experience it is. How it robs you of your thinking, your emotions, and your sense of the future. How it affects everything in your life, like your work and your relationships.

Sadly, clinical research has found that every time you have an episode of major depressive disorder, your chances of getting it again goes up. If you have suffered two previous episodes of clinical depression, your chances of getting depressed again jumps up to almost 80 percent. Some people struggle with depression their whole lives, seemingly caught in a vicious cycle.

**The good news is that research has discovered why depression keeps coming back, and how to prevent future episodes.** Basically, your brain creates certain patterns based on your experiences. If you've been depressed in the past, your brain has sort of a "depression groove" that you can keep falling back into.

All of us have ups and downs in mood on a daily basis. However, if you've been depressed before, and you have even a small dip in mood, it will take you longer to pull out of that dip compared to people who have never been depressed. When your mood is down, you are at risk for gradually spiraling down even further.

For example, let's say you had dinner plans with a friend tonight, but right now, you are feeling a little down, so you decide to cancel and stay home. Sometimes we all need to take a break and stay home, but watch out for this becoming a pattern. When you stay home, you feel a little more lonely, which makes you a little more sad. Because you feel more sad, you definitely don't want to go out tomorrow night. After staying home two nights in a row, you feel even more sad, which starts to activate some negative thoughts, like, "I'm such a loser for just staying home alone," which makes your mood drop even more.

Depression tends to come on gradually like this, rather than all at once, if you pay attention. People usually don't want to acknowledge the reality that depression is coming back, since it is such a horrible thing to go through. So, they tend to ignore it, or push themselves harder, which only makes them feel more tired and more depressed.

If you can pay attention to the oncoming warning signs, you can take action to prevent a full episode of depression from coming back. Even though you will not like realizing it might be coming back, it is much easier and much more effective to take action early, before you slide all the way down into the deep pit of depression.

Use the space below to write down your own warning signs that the depression is returning. What kinds of thoughts start popping up in your mind? What emotions start coming up? What do you feel in your body? What do you tend to do (for example, sleep too much, watch a lot of TV, stay home more, worry about problems constantly, etc.)?

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**Once you notice the warning signs, it is important to take action.** Some people withdraw and give up on doing things altogether, in the hope that their unpleasant thoughts and emotions, or the things they need to deal with, will be “out of sight, out of mind.” Unfortunately, this strategy works only temporarily at best.

It’s good to have a plan when the depression starts coming back, because when the depression grows stronger, you may not feel like doing anything. Make a promise to yourself to create a list below, and to do something on that list whether you feel like it or not when the symptoms start to show up again.

What specific things can you do to take care of yourself when you see the signs of depression coming on? For example, call your therapist (if you don’t have one, get one!), talk to a friend or family member, write your feelings down on paper to get some perspective on them, take a relaxing bath, do a hobby, take a walk, exercise, etc.

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Since depression robs you of motivation, it may be hard to do the above things, even when you know it will help. In the space below, write down your reasons for wanting to stay mentally healthy. What is important to you? What makes your life more fulfilling? You may wish to start with broad categories, like family, relationships, spirituality, learning, career, etc. Take some time to ponder these questions since things often don’t seem that important once the depression takes hold of you.

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When depression creeps in, your automatic impulse may be to get lost in your head, and worry about all of your problems, or about other people, or about the future. Sometimes that can be helpful, but when you notice that you are not really fixing anything by worrying, don’t forget to keep asking yourself, “What do I need to do right now to take care of *myself*?” Bring your attention back to the present, and just take things one moment at a time.

Ideally, make some time every day to take care of yourself, and remind yourself of what really matters to you. If you can add more self-care on a regular basis, and stay focused on what you value most in life, you may be able to prevent depression from even starting to come back.