

Mental Health Superheroes

An illustration of two people jumping joyfully against a blue background. On the left, a woman with orange hair in a bun, wearing a pink dress and yellow shoes, is jumping over a large orange circle. On the right, a man with dark hair, wearing a green shirt and orange pants, is jumping over a large yellow circle. The overall style is flat and colorful.

**ADVICE ON
MANAGING YOUR
MENTAL HEALTH
DURING THE
COVID-19 CRISIS**

**from people
who already
live with
mental health
problems**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CLICK TO JUMP TO:

[Introduction](#)

[Prevention & Looking After Yourself](#)

[Anxiety & Feeling Overwhelmed](#)

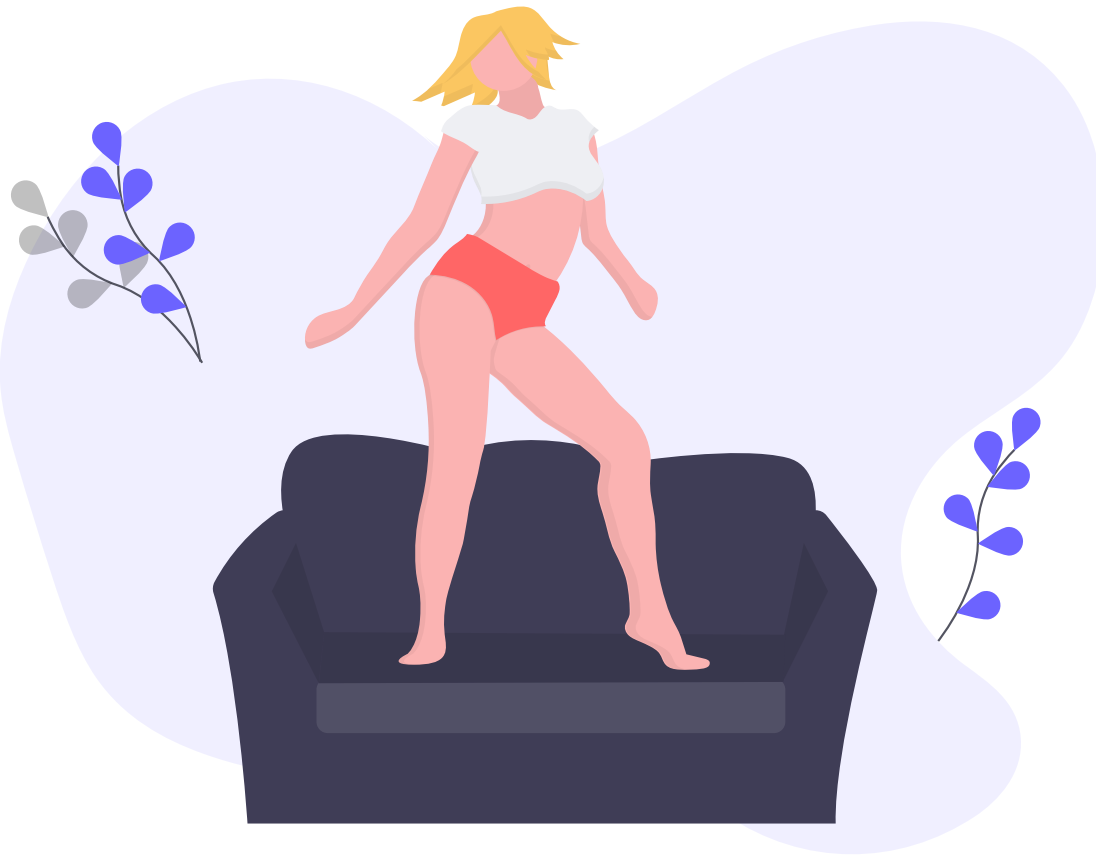
[Opening Up & Therapy](#)

[Medical Stuff](#)

[Low Mood & Depression](#)

[Panic Attacks](#)

[OCD](#)



INTRODUCTION

It's common-ish knowledge that **one in four people will experience some form of mental health problem in their lifetime.** That means, statistically, that three out of every four people out there have never felt serious, prolonged anxiety or depression, or been through a panic attack, or lived with Bipolar Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder or any of a telephone book's worth of mental health problems.

This short guide is very much for those three out of four people.

As people all over the world lock-down, self-isolate and navigate the daily uncertainty of the Covid-19 crisis, it's highly likely that some of you will begin, for the first time, to experience the first twinges of problematic anxiety, be laid low by a bout of depression or experience the pale knuckled intensity of a panic attack.

**Don't worry.
We know how you feel.
Literally.**

The various authors of this short guide are very familiar with those feelings. Between us, we have years of lived experience managing and surviving often crippling anxiety, depression, panic attacks and other life-invading mental health problems. We've often had to learn the hard way how to avoid or ride out those storms.

Now, in the midst of a social and economic crisis that puts many people's mental health at risk for the first time, we can use those hard-learned lessons to help other people. Our mental health problems can become superpowers. Sort of.

So have a read through this guide, because prevention is better than a cure. Even if you have never felt the heavy sag of depression, or the sweaty grip of anxiety, reading this guide might keep it that way. It's not very long and unless you're a key worker, you've probably not got anywhere else to be. Winky face.



PSST, OVER HERE

This guide is divided, roughly, into sections relating to preventing and managing some more common mental health conditions.

The authors of this guide are not medical professionals. We are people who live with mental health problems.

So, if you are thinking about harming yourself, or are having thoughts of suicide, contact the Samaritans on 116 123, by email at jo@samaritans.org or on Twitter at [@samaritans](https://twitter.com/samaritans).

You can also get help online or via phone from organisations like Shout or Childline.

If you are experiencing low mood, depression, anxiety or panic attacks for a prolonged period and of a severity that is obstructing your day-to-day life, please speak to your GP as soon as possible.

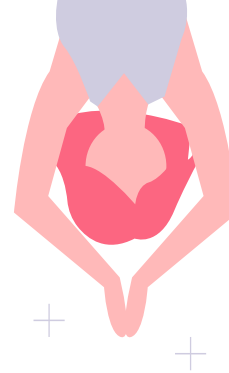
Prevention & Looking After Yourself

We're all living with a huge amount of change, turmoil, stress and restrictions right now.

Regardless of how the crisis is affecting our jobs, our finances, our family and friends or anything else, all of us are living in a more uncertain and stressful world, for at least the next few months.

So, now more than ever, looking after your mental and physical health, relationships and wellbeing is fundamentally important.

Like brushing your teeth, wiping your bum or walking the dog, caring for your mental health is not always fun. Sometimes, it's just the necessary work we have to do to keep our lives in good working order. But if you follow some of the following advice, you should feel the benefits and avoid the worse effects of this crisis on your mental health.



MINDFULNESS & MEDITATION

“Feel your feelings. Trying to resist our feelings can be very tiring. I invite you not to tell yourself that you shouldn't feel a certain way but to ask is the emotion warranted by the situation? If yes, accept it, honour how you feel, and take steps to reduce it if it's too much.

“If an emotion is not warranted, for example if you feel scared about being away from a partner, so you react with anger and push them away, try to notice this. Try doing the opposite action to what your instinct is telling you (eg. try to express your vulnerability and fear). Try to think if an action will build connection or move you further away from someone. Be mindful of your needs and be kind to yourself.”

“When we quietly reflect internally, focusing on sensations, images, feelings and thoughts, we help to better integrate the brain. Mindfulness is very helpful as well as journaling. Apps like **Calm** and **Headspace** help with this, but there are many free alternatives, such as **Insight Timer**.”

“Mindfulness can be an amazing tool for accepting difficult emotions and situations. I recommend the ‘Headspace’ app.”





NEWS & INFORMATION

“If getting updates constantly via apps or social media is increasing your anxiety, **block notifications** or unfollow them. Limit yourself to particular windows of time in which to update yourself. I go full out and just leave my phone in another room for a few hours sometimes to get a break.”

“**Try to ensure that any news you follow comes from a reliable source, such as the World Health Organisation.** Avoiding misinformation can help to reduce confusion and anxiety around everything that is going on. Remember that even well-meaning politicians are only human, and therefore biased. I have family in various countries, so I see information about the crisis from a lot of different sources that are not always consistent. Knowing where to look for reliable information helps me navigate this with less anxiety.”

DAY-TO-DAY

“Having a schedule, even if it’s waking up at the same time every day and setting a goal for the day is helpful. Even if it’s cleaning your room!”

“Try to get into a routine. Particularly if you are struggling, set alarms or create visuals (sticky notes for example) to help you keep this routine. If you cannot, forgive yourself. But if you are able to keep routines going, they can help create security and wellbeing, and a sense of pride for small achievements. Those become a big deal when you’re struggling, even things like showering each day.”

“Get enough sleep.”

“It’s important to strike a balance between sleeping too much and not enough. Sleep is so vital in the night, so creating a relaxing ritual away from screens for at least 30 minutes before sleeping is necessary.”

“Try to recognise changes to how you’re presenting. If your appetite or sleep has changed for example, these can be signs that your mental health is wobbling and you might need to brainstorm some self-care ideas.”

“If your appetite has changed drastically, increasing or decreasing, give yourself time to weather it out. If you find yourself overeating, try and make sure you also eat some fruits and veggies along with comfort food. If you find yourself not hungry and not eating, don’t force yourself to eat three full meals, but try to eat what is most appealing to you so you have energy day to day.”

“Celebrate the small steps. I was hesitant to try gratitude journaling, but it’s been very helpful to me. Just sitting and writing three things I feel grateful for, even if it is that I got out of bed or brushed my teeth. My brain gets in a negativity rut and I’m trying to establish happy paths so my thoughts don’t all run into that rut.”

“At the end of every day, say three good things that you did or that happened to you. It may be tricky to start with if you’re really down, but the habit makes it easier and it raises your self-esteem and mood.”

EXERCISE

“A little movement, every day, goes a long way. Make it as small or as big as possible. Yoga, stretching, walking around the house...”

“Yoga is a massive help for me and easy to do at home with little space. **‘Yoga with Adrienne’** on YouTube is accessible for beginners and an excellent free resource.”

“High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) is also great to do at home without any equipment and requires minimal time to do. Some workouts are as short as eight minutes long, but still have a real effect. There are currently lots of companies and personal trainers offering free or discounted workout courses, so have a look around.”



FRIENDS, FAMILY & COMMUNITY

“Taking time to connect to people is very important. Even if it’s on WhatsApp or FaceTime, having contact with your support network such as friends and family, peer support is vital. Schedule in an hour a day if necessary.”

“Helping others helps me so much. Even if our issues are different, I can relate to pain, loneliness, fear and anxiety. The reason for it doesn’t matter.”

“Remember that we are all in this together and we are all trying to get out of this together.”

“Help someone else. **The best way I found to lift me up was realizing that I had something to offer others.** I check on people even if I’m not feeling my best. I listen and I sit with them in whatever they are feeling. My go-to answers are, “That sounds really rough, I’m sorry you are going through this” or, “It seems you have a lot on your plate right now, it is okay to feel overwhelmed. Can I do something to ease some of the weight?””



“Share your feelings with others but try to ensure the conversation is geared toward expressing and recognising your feelings about what is going on, not spiralling into them.

It may help to have an “exit strategy” such as sharing new music with each other or speaking while doing an activity. This can help it to feel less intense to talk about difficult subjects, particularly if you find it distressing to make eye contact or have people looking at you while you talk about your feelings.”

“Develop a safe word you can say to someone, whether in person or digitally, to let them know if you’re struggling and try to have a plan for how they can help at these times. For example, rather than having to tell someone I’m feeling really low I might text a friend “taco” and they will reply with cute puppy pictures to lift my spirits or give me a call to check in and talk about Netflix for a while.”

CREATIVITY

“I really recommend creative work that takes you away from your computer. I’m finding my laptop hard to look at both emotionally and... Ow, my eyes. But if that’s all you can do then, whatever. Mindfulness when doing household tasks can help. Like peeling fruit, or washing up, folding laundry but super slowly and just being in the moment.”

“Being creative is so vital, if it’s doodling, gardening, dancing, music, singing...”

“Try to bring some silliness into your life! Try a new hobby, don’t be afraid to be bad at something, or to make art with no goal in mind- just to enjoy the process. Challenge your inner perfectionist!”



“I usually go deeeeeeeeeeeep into my creativity during weird times. I recently lived in rural Sweden for five months, where there was simply no one to talk to. I knitted, crocheted, made tons of stuff, painted... Now I’m in South Italy. It’s actually more sociable in lockdown here than it was on a normal day in London or Sweden! One tip from myself and locals is making bread. We all seem to retreat into making bread. The smell is comforting and the physical kneading is a sensual relaxing experience. And then you can eat it!”

“Find a form of expression that works for you: Sing to yourself; write letters that you bin, tear up or never send; journal; draw; bake, anything to help you get your emotions out so you can start to recognise and process them instead of allowing them to stagnate inside you.”



“Be kind to yourself.”

Anxiety & Feeling Overwhelmed

Stress and anxiety are natural, useful emotions to feel when you're in danger or risky situations. With everything happening right now, **it is totally natural and expected that many of us will feel anxious or overwhelmed.**

But if that feeling of being overwhelmed is sticking around for long periods of time, even when you're in the bath or having a quiet walk, then it can become a problem. **Generalised anxiety is when that feeling sticks around for days or weeks at a time, or comes wriggling your way when there's nothing to really be anxious about.**

For some, it can lead to anxiety attacks; a paralysing feeling vthat every noise, thought, sensation and thing you can see is coming at you at 100 miles per hour and covered in spikes.

It can also create what is called a **"Fight or Flight"** response, which is the very literal, primal feeling of wanting to either physically fight or run away from your situation. And afterwards, you can feel exhausted on every level, thanks to the muscle tension and flood of adrenaline that has been rushing through your body and brain.

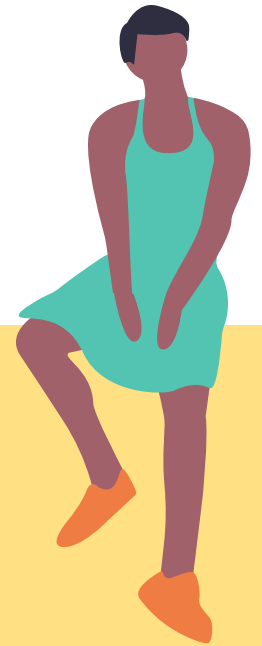
Fight or flight responses are, in fact, very clever and effective tools for animals in the wild, including early humans. Your hair follicles stand up, in an attempt to make the fur you no longer have spread out and make you appear larger. You might turn pale, as blood rushes to your heart and legs, to fuel your escape, and away from your skin, to prevent excessive blood loss if you are wounded by a predator.

It even suppresses the part of your brain that deals with empathy, so that you temporarily put your own safety above other people's. Pretty smart, but not great when you're trying to make an omelette or tie your shoelaces. And **definitely not helpful when you're stuck indoors.**



Managing Anxiety

If you start to feel anxious or overwhelmed, here are some tips to help you ride it out:



Breathe.

Specifically, breathe in through your nose for a count of four and out through your mouth for a count of four.

Repeat.

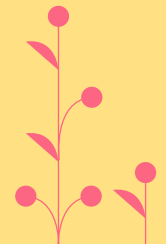
Look around you.

What colours can you see?

What sounds can you hear?

What smells can you... smell?

What sensations can you feel?



You'll probably feel like this is doing nothing at all, but trust us who have been there, it is. **Keep going**, even as your anxiety is having a tantrum in your mind. Keep going until you start to feel calmer again, and then keep going some more to make sure.

Doing this helps to take you out of your head and ground you, physically, when you are lost in your thoughts and emotions. You can also put a hair band or elastic band around your wrist (not too tight, you need that hand) and snap it lightly against your skin when you feel anxious or overwhelmed. This can help bring you back to your physical self.



Get out in nature.

If you can. If there is a hill near you, climb it and get some literal distance and perspective on your problems.

If you can't do that physically, close your eyes and think about hills and beaches and fresh air and wind and waves. **If you start thinking anxious thoughts, acknowledge them mentally and then return to your imaginary scenery.**

Make a list, in your head or on paper, of all the challenges and scary situations you have dealt with and overcome in the past. You did that. You can do it again.

Read a book or watch something funny to distract your mind and move on. Compile a list of YouTube videos or podcast episodes that reliably make you smile or laugh and watch them when you feel overwhelmed.

Have a bath or a shower. Take your time washing each part of your body in turn.

Let someone you care about know that you are thinking of them. You don't have to have a conversation with them; just let them know you care.

If you have someone you trust that you can talk to, let them know you need to talk. Let them know that you don't necessarily need them to offer solutions or share their own problems. This time, you just need someone to listen. Or, if you don't have anyone to talk to at that moment, get a pen and paper and write down all the thoughts in your head in any order.

The main purpose here is simply to get what is in your head, out of your head. It doesn't have to make any sense. Just upend that mental handbag and see what crap tumbles out.

Anxious thoughts are like the Wizard of Oz: they seem big and scary in your head, but when you pull back the curtain and expose them, they're usually small and puny, like a tiny, old man with a machine that makes his voice sound big and booming. Feel free to point and laugh at their puniness.

P R E V E N T I O N

A lot of the general **Prevention and Self-Care** tips will help you prevent anxiety, so have a read of those, but here's a couple of specific ones:

“Try to get an understanding of the “warning signs” that come before you feel anxious or overwhelmed.”

“For me, I find if I am Googling something about the thing that I just Googled, which stemmed from something I Googled before, by the third Google I am in danger of disappearing into a depressing search engine hole and need to eject quickly, until I have a clearer head

“In other situations I might feel like my head is resisting taking in information or I find myself fidgeting, which generally means I need to take a break before things go too far.”

Some other tips include:

Drink tea. Decaf if panicked or racing thoughts.

Read a book or watch something funny to distract your mind.

Take a bath and listen to a podcast.

Let someone know you are thinking of them.

Work on whatever is in front of you.

Draw something. Build Lego. Cook.

Do something real and physical.

Turn off social media for the rest of the day.

Tell someone you trust.

Hug a loved one, if you have one around.

Spend five minutes tidying or cleaning.



Opening Up & Therapy

One of the best ways to prevent and manage mental health problems is to get sharing your thoughts and emotions. You can ask for help and support at any time and it's best to deal with it before it becomes a big alarm-bells crisis.

As one contributor said:

"I used to wait until I was very low before I looked for help. It's as if I didn't feel I deserved it until I was in a crisis. **Know that people care about you and you can reach out at any stage.**"

But if you'd rather get Coronavirus than bear your innermost fears and feelings to the world, remember that there are different ways that you can do this. It doesn't mean ugly-crying in front of all nearest and dearest. However you choose to do it, the main thing is to just do it (don't sue us, Nike).

Here are some tips for how to safely open up and cast those tiny little emotional vampires squealing into the daylight:

"Be careful who you talk to about your struggles, but do share and be vulnerable when you can. It develops connections and allows one to show and receive compassion that wouldn't otherwise be there and this is healing."

"If you're looking for support from a friend or family member, make sure first that they have the time and energy available to help you through it. People who care about you will want to help, but they also need to make sure that they can, at that moment, or else you risk them glancing at their watch or getting overwhelmed."

"When opening up to another person, make it clear that you need a listening ear, not immediate solutions. It's okay if they sit, nod and go, "Uh huh...". That's often more valuable than practical advice."



"Keep a journal. I don't like to feel pressure to write everything that happened to me but at the end of a day I jot down three impressions I have of the day and one or two things I'm grateful for."

"Shame and guilt are not useful. They may pop up at the worst times. When I feel them coming, my way to be able to process and not suppress these emotions, since they tend to fester in me, is to talk to those feelings as if they were a person I care about. I tell them I hear them. I thank them for letting me know that this is a difficult situation for me and tell them they can rest now because I have received the message."

"Don't be afraid to cry or feel sad or angry. I don't beat myself up about this, but I don't give myself permission to wallow or dig in too much. I try to make this a "no thoughts allowed" area. Feelings only."

T H E R A P Y

If you try out therapy, in any way shape or form, know that there are many different styles and approaches out there. If the first one you access does not feel like a good fit, then it is okay and perfectly normal to explore other therapists and approaches, until you find one that is helpful to you.

“If I had a choice, I would ensure the whole world had access to a counsellor. It’s a fantastic way to learn about yourself. If there is anyone struggling and who feels that they need help, please consider engaging with a counsellor online. I completely understand that not everyone can afford this, but you may be able to find low-cost options in your area. The BACP website is a good place to start. And remember that it can take a few tries with different therapists to find the right one for you. It can be a slow and sometimes frustrating process, but it’s important to make sure you find the person best-suited to help you.”



MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS (UK)

Therapist

Someone who offers therapy. This could refer to a variety of professions.

CBT Practitioner / Therapist

Someone who is trained in cognitive behavioural practice and/or psychotherapy, which is a specific and widely available approach to therapy, especially in the NHS.

Any CBT practitioner should be registered with BABCP (British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies).

Other professions may use CBT-informed approaches, whereas CBT practitioners are less likely to employ other approaches unless they have the additional training to do so.

Counsellor

Generally, trained to focus on shorter-term or more focused issues, such as a bereavement, but there can be overlap with psychotherapy. Should be registered with BACP (the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy) in the UK.

Psychotherapist

The training for psychotherapy is longer and tends to have a stronger academic component than counselling, meant to enable psychotherapists to deal with both short term difficulties and more enduring difficulties in their practice. Also should be registered with the BACP.

Psychologist

There are different types of psychologists, but all require a doctorate or equivalent and are protected titles in the UK. The two branches more likely to be relevant to readers are counselling psychologists (whose training is more inclusive of working with people who do not have significant mental health conditions) and clinical psychologists (whose work is more focused on mental illness). All practitioner psychologists must register with the HCPC (Health and Care Professions Council) to use their title, and may choose to register or be chartered with additional professional bodies such as the BPS.

Psychiatrist

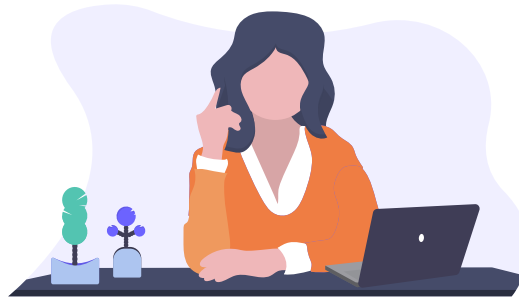
Medically trained individuals who specialised in psychiatry, the way other doctors might specialise in paediatrics. They can, as medical doctors, prescribe medication (as can your GP). Psychiatrists are registered on the Medical Register and may also be members of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCPsych).

Medical Stuff

“Ask a yourself how long, how frequently you’ve been feeling like this. If you are worried it’s going on too long, phone your GP.”

Mental health is no more or less crucial than physical health, even if sometimes we don’t give them the same importance. For some people, going to their GP about their mental health feels like a massive step, or like they are blowing things out of proportion. But if you’re worried about your mental health, and have been for a few weeks or more, then **it’s really no different to getting a lump checked out, or talking to your doctor about a persistent headache.** Speaking to your GP can bring a huge amount of relief, too. Remember: they are trained to deal with these issues and should be able to recommend or prescribe different treatments, from lifestyle changes, to talking therapies, to medication.

That said, here are a few tips for talking to your GP about your mental health:



First, when you book an appointment, let them know it relates to your mental health and you can get a double appointment, giving you more time to discuss how you’re feeling and to answer the doctor’s questions.

Second, **remember that you are in control of your treatment.** If your GP suggests a certain approach, like therapy or medication, it is totally up to you whether or not you accept their recommendations. If you don’t like how your GP is dealing with you and your problem, or they don’t seem to understand, you can ask to see a different GP. This is your right.

Third, taking medication for a mental health problem is admirable. **You are taking control of your health and your situation.** Mental health medication helps millions of people to live productive, happier lives.

Make sure you get as much information from your GP as you can about the different medications available, their effects and side-effects. Ask questions. If you have concerns about a side-effect, talk to your GP about it. And if you change your mind about starting a medication, that’s up to you.

Lastly, **if you do start taking a medication, follow your doctor’s instructions and recommendations.** Be a patient patient. It can take time for medication to take effect and you may have to deal with some initial side-effects. If you want to stop taking your medication, talk to your GP about it. That is your right and they should support you to do it safely. **Whatever you do, don’t simply stop altogether.** You risk creating much bigger problems for yourself.

And consider letting a close, trusted friend or family member know that you are starting medication, or coming off it if you choose to, so that they can be there to support you through any side effects or changes.

“Take your meds! Take your meds! I sometimes miss a dose and I really don’t understand why. Don’t be like me! It’s unnecessary and I suffer for it.”

Low Mood & Depression

For people not familiar with low mood or depression, they often imagine it to be like feeling sad or upset, but more often or for longer than normal. But if you ask anyone who has experienced long periods of low mood or depression, they'll give you that look. You know, that look that says, "Um, no."

Depression can take many forms,

from uncontrollable bouts of sobbing - sometimes for no apparent reason - to a crushing, suffocating sense of emptiness and nothingness. It can be an absence of feeling anything at all, or it can seem like every sensation, thought and experience is being put through a special filter that sucks all the optimism, hope and happiness from everything. It can keep you up all night or it can make you want to sleep all day.

It can come out of nowhere, or it can be a response to stress, trauma, grief or significant changes in your life. You know, like this current crisis is causing many of us.



Frankly, it fucking sucks.

So here are our top tips for keeping depression at bay and for managing it if it comes your way.

“Depression may look different from what is portrayed in movies and the media. Even if you don’t think you qualify as being depressed, these techniques or tips won’t harm you and may work out if you are feeling that you are not yourself.”

“**Low mood often comes with low self-esteem and negative self-talk.** If you are struggling to feel good in yourself, **remind yourself of the people in your life who love you** and try to be kind to yourself for their sake.”



“**Question that negative voice. Imagine a friend is saying those things about themselves, would you believe them?**”

“Remember that it isn’t always like this. It just is sometimes. It’s okay to feel sad sometimes. **You are not defined by your feelings and thoughts.** Depression wants you to think the depressed you is the real you, the only real you, but you’re more complicated than that.”

“You might not feel like anything is worth doing. And doing those things might not make you feel better. But – and this sounds like the dumbest advice but I promise it’s worthwhile – do it anyway. You know how extreme sports junkies say, “**Feel the fear and do it anyway**”? Well, depressive people need to feel the crippling, existential emptiness and do it anyway, which frankly is way harder than bungee jumping or whatever. Do the things you can do. As much as you can, keep doing the things and, at some point, somewhere down the line, you’ll start to rediscover the meaning and satisfaction in just doing things.”

“**Make life easy for yourself.** For people who are really struggling, just getting out of bed and feeding yourself can be really challenging. I recommend you try to make things as easy as possible in the short term. If you can’t cook, buy ready-made meals. No, it’s not as healthy, but you will get nutrition. If you lack energy in the morning, choose and lay out your clothes the day before. There is a limit to how much will-power and energy we all have so, in really tough times, use it wisely on the basics to keep yourself well.”

“When you have the energy, make “Try to Do” lists: attainable lists of things to do each day; small targets, in my case covering various different categories. Small things count.”

“When depressed I have great difficulty getting motivation particularly to do anything creative. The only way to overcome this is to be obsessively process-oriented, not giving a fuck about how ‘good’ the end result is and scraping together all the pleasure I can from the activity itself.”

“On those days where you feel too depressed to get out of bed say out loud “I could stay in bed all day / week / quarantine period / winter / year / decade and the people who matter would still love me.” I had to tell this to myself several times this winter and knowing I had that option, accepting my depression, really helped me through that period. **You are loved for who you are, not what you do.”**

“Happiness is like nature. If you nurture her, she grows.

If you do not, she withers. And remembering that it’s all fleeting can make that hard. You begin to question the worth of sustaining joy in everyday things when they are only but to last a breath.”

“If you’re struggling, try to set things out for yourself the night before: clothes you will wear tomorrow, a towel you like for your shower, your hair brush etc. so that if you can just get yourself up you don’t have to think too much, you can just follow a production-line type routine to get yourself up and ready for the day.

I try to get ready even if I have nowhere to go so when I look in the mirror I can see that I’ve already achieved something: even if that something is putting trousers on.

I also find that I can be really hard on myself appearance-wise when I’m low, so it helps me to avoid self-criticism.”

“Do things in steps, break it down to something manageable. Like I will put out a part of my routine at a time, because laying everything out at once can be overwhelming. Recognise when you are able to start a step, and when you complete it. Both are significant.”

“Set boundaries. I prefer to take on other people’s issues as well as my own and struggle to say no to helping others. I am not saying we should stop helping others, but you also have to look after yourself, which sometimes means saying no to others for a while as you yourself recuperate. As they say on airplanes, **place the oxygen mask on your own face before assisting others.** You’re no good to them if you pass out.”

If you are thinking about harming yourself, or are having thoughts of suicide, contact:

**the Samaritans on 116 123,
by email at jo@samaritans.org
or on Twitter at [@samaritans](https://twitter.com/samaritans).**

You can also get help online or via phone from organisations like Shout or Childline.



Panick Attacks

Panic attacks and anxiety attacks are different but equally annoying beasties. Like mosquitoes and midges.

Panic attacks are sudden and extreme. They are often accompanied by chest pain, shaking and trembling and a feeling of being floaty or disconnected from your body or surroundings (referred to by professionals as depersonalisation or derealisation). Sometimes people mistake panic attacks for a heart attack. Fair enough, really.

Both panic attacks and anxiety attacks might make you short of breath and increase your heart rate. They can sometimes be tricky to tell apart. (See the section above about anxiety for more information on anxiety attacks). They are both, though, fucking awful to go through and can leave you feeling exhausted for hours or days afterwards.

But, and this is important to remember when they are happening: they do pass.

They always pass.

“Trying to slow your breathing will also help to counteract the physical symptoms of a panic attack and in turn can help to soothe your panic.”

“I usually have 3 contributing factors to a panic attack. Sharp physical pain (migraines, stabby ovary bastard pain from hell), the feeling that something big is upsetting me, and hormonal changes. If they all collide, then BOOM. The pain can last for three days in my back and chest. But I noticed **panic attacks happen to me as part of my journey to becoming stronger. It’s like shedding my old skin.**”



“If you are unsure if what you are experiencing is a panic attack or not remember that **panic attacks are like orgasms – if you’re not sure whether you’ve had one or not you haven’t had one.**”

“I personally find that knowing I am having a panic attack helps to ground me, even if it remains an unpleasant experience. To me, a panic attack feels like a tight chest pain, my heart pounding, my breathing speeding up, restlessness, catastrophic thinking (thinking about often irrational, worst-case scenarios) and a sort of emotional ache or nausea. But if I can recognise what is happening, I can tell myself that I know what is happening and that it will pass.”

“For me it helps to have someone tell me that I am safe. Hearing someone else say it helps me believe it. If I am alone I like to imagine Gandalf from Lord of the Rings telling me,

“This too shall pass”

and reassuring me when I am struggling that I should take my own word for it.”

OCD

As anyone with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) will tell you, there's a difference between being clean and tidy, or having little superstitious rituals, and living with OCD.

OCD is an often crippling form of anxiety, in which people become trapped by their anxiety in repeated actions, mantras, thought patterns and behaviours. It's possible that, under these stressful circumstances, with everyone talking about personal hygiene, and stuck in your home for long periods of time, you may develop some symptoms of OCD.

This is especially true if you already have those tendencies or suffer it mildly. **If you find yourself carrying out repeated behaviours in an obsessive, uncontrollable way to a degree that is affecting your health or interfering with your day-to-day life, contact your GP and ask for an appointment.**

Here are some tips on managing OCD, from someone living with the condition:

1. Try and reduce your obsession with every little detail. There is plenty of good advice as to how to take precautions, but you cannot allow this to run riot, or it will never end.

2. Little self care steps are important. Have a wash, groom yourself, do a little exercise. It all helps you to regain a sense of living. Similarly, adopting a basic routine can be very useful for rousing you.

3. An OCD aversion tip is to push through when it's uncomfortable – the idea being that the next time you do the same thing it won't feel quite so hard. Think of it as a mental push-up, with each effort making you stronger.

4. There are now many opportunities to create something, experiment with something, or do something. **I do not subscribe to the idea that this has to result in anything especially productive,** but it may give a needed outlet, a sense of achievement and, most importantly, a vital distraction from spending all your time with your thoughts.

5. Connecting with friends or family has to be done virtually, but it's important to retain a sense of the world outside yourself and not to be, as it were, totally isolated while self-isolating.

6. Experiencing the outdoors in some measure (even if it's spending time in a garden or going for a brisk and careful walk) provides needed contrast to being cooped up in entirety. Just be sensible.

7. The more you and people around you are **grounded,** the more likely it is that new opportunities and projects will emerge and **new exciting things will appear in your life.**



**You are
stronger
than you
think.**

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