



Depression treatment options

Depression is more than just a feeling of sadness or going through a rough patch. It is a serious mental illness that requires understanding and medical attention. If left untreated, depression can have devastating consequences for sufferers and their families. Fortunately, with early detection, diagnosis and a treatment plan, most people will do better. Common treatments include medication, psychotherapy and healthy lifestyles.

Choosing the right combination of treatments and tools that work for you is an important step in the recovery process. Treatment options for mental illness vary from person to person. Even people with the same diagnosis have different experiences, needs, treatment goals and life goals. There is no “one-size-fits-all” treatment.

The following is a list of treatment options:

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy (or talk therapy) has an excellent track record of helping people with depressive disorders. While some psychotherapies have been researched more than others, many types can be helpful and effective. A good relationship with a therapist can help improve outcomes. Types of psychotherapy include:

- **Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)** helps assess and change negative thinking patterns associated with depression. The goal of this structured therapy is to recognize negative thoughts and teach coping strategies. CBT is often time-limited and can in some cases be limited to 8–16 sessions.
- **Interpersonal therapy (IPT)** focuses on improving problems in personal relationships and other life changes that can contribute to depressive disorders. Therapists teach individuals to evaluate their interactions and improve their relationships with others. IPT is often time-limited like CBT.
- **Psychodynamic therapy** is a therapeutic approach based on recognizing and understanding negative behavioral patterns and feelings that are rooted in past experiences and working to resolve them. Looking at a person’s unconscious processes is another component of this psychotherapy. It can be done in short-term or longer-term modes.

Psychoeducation and Support Groups

- **Psychoeducation** involves educating individuals about their illness, their treatment and recognizing signs of relapse. Family psychoeducation is also helpful for family members who want to understand what their loved one is experiencing.
- **Support groups** offer participants the opportunity to share experiences and coping strategies. Support groups can be for the person with the mental health condition, for family/friends or a combination of both. Mental health professionals lead some support groups, but groups can also be peer-led.

Medications

In some people, antidepressants can help to alleviate or control the symptoms. Antidepressants often take 2–4 weeks to take effect and up to 12 weeks to take full effect. Most people will have to try various doses or medications to find what works for them.

Brain Stimulation Therapies

Brain stimulation therapies can be effective, typically after other treatments have not been effective.

- **Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT)** involves transmitting short electrical impulses into the brain. ECT causes some side effects, including memory loss. Individuals should understand the risks and benefits of this intervention before beginning a treatment trial. ECT is the gold standard in terms of effectiveness, especially when medications have not been helpful.
- **Repetitive Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (rTMS)** is a relatively new type of brain stimulation that activates the brain using an electro-magnet instead of an electric current. It is not approved as a maintenance treatment.
- **Vagus Nerve Stimulation (VNS)** has a complex history. To better understand this treatment, read the NIMH summary of these and other interventions for brain stimulation.

Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM)

Relying solely on CAM methods may not be enough to treat depression, but in combination with psychotherapy and medication they can be useful.

- **Exercise.** Studies show that aerobic exercise can help treat mild depression because it increases endorphins and stimulates norepinephrine, which can improve a person's mood.
- **Folate.** Some studies have shown that people with depression who lack folate (also known as folic acid or vitamin B9), may not get the full benefit from the antidepressants they take. Studies suggest that in some situations taking L-methylfolate (an active form of folate) can be an additional treatment with other psychiatric medications.

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