

TURNING DEPRESSION AROUND -- WHAT CAN I DO?

GUIDELINES:

- put some structure into your life
- don't try to do everything all at once, take it "one day at a time"
- be kind to yourself – you didn't cause this depression, any more than you caused the last cold you caught (yeah, maybe you should have washed your hands after touching that doorknob, but who can remember to wash their hands EVERY TIME?? ☺)
- minimize use of alcohol or other drugs as these will increase your depression

CHOOSE A REASONABLE SCHEDULE –

IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN OR NEED TO LET GO OF SO THAT I HAVE ENOUGH TIME TO DO WHAT I NEED TO DO TURN MY DEPRESSION AROUND?

Take a realistic look at your daily schedule right now – write down your daily schedule and responsibilities. Is there anything you can let go of to give you more time to work on the self-care that you will NEED to do in order to turn your depression around? Sometimes it is better to let go of some responsibilities in the short run, so that you can better take care of them in the long run. Remember the flight attendant advice: "...make sure to put the oxygen mask on yourself first before attempting to help someone else put on theirs."

If you have gotten behind on your schoolwork and you are dealing with depression, the best strategy may be to talk to your professors about the situation and what your options are in each class, to determine whether any accommodations can be made, such as an extension on a paper or a project, or whether realistically you are better off taking a class pass/fail, or even dropping the class. For students who are experiencing major depression that has interfered in all of their classes and it is too late in the semester to *realistically* catch up, a medical withdrawal may be possible where you could get "W's" on your transcripts and get a fresh start next semester. You may also qualify for a partial refund if you document your medical withdrawal and do a written petition. It is important to consult with a financial aid counselor first however, to determine potential effects on your financial aid of going from full time to part time status or withdrawing for a semester.

SLEEP

- if you are having any sleep problems, start by intentionally regulating your sleep schedule. Best to try to sleep 8 hours a night, going to sleep between 10pm to midnight, and awakening by 8am (9am at the latest). The occasional night of staying up really late and sleeping in really late won't hurt you, but if this is a regular thing for you and your sleep is getting messed up, you will have a very difficult time turning around your depression. (See resources below for dealing with insomnia).

EXERCISE

This is one of the single biggest things you can do to turn around depression; exercise 3-4 times a week, about a half hour of rhythmic exercise like walking (if you're feeling really sluggish, try to get in a couple of more intense workouts like running or using an exercise bike). Find a form of exercise you enjoy at least a little; or if you really hate the gym but know you feel a lot better after you workout and it's winter and the gym is the only place you realistically will exercise, get an exercise buddy to go with you, or just remind yourself of how good you will feel when you get done. Yoga is a helpful practice (and there are free groups right on campus). Outdoor activities in nature are especially helpful with depression.

MAKE SOCIAL PLANS

•even if you don't feel like it, make plans to get together with friends and family. Reconnect with old friends that you can be real with (if they don't live in town, reconnect with them by phone/Skype/Facebook).

Identify at least one friend or family member that you can be real with, and really talk to them about how you are feeling. If you fear that you are "burdening" them, let them know that you would like support right now, but that you don't want it to become too much for them, and ask for them to let you know if it does become too much. Then you don't have to worry about it.

DO A SELF-NURTURING ACTIVITY EACH DAY

Make a list of comforting things you can do for yourself every day, keep this list somewhere where you can SEE it, and when you are feeling down, reach for the list and just TRY one thing. You can work with your counselor to make a list that works for you, but here are a couple of ideas: take a hot shower, go for a short walk somewhere in nature, watch a TV comedy, ask a friend for a neck-rub, listen to some relaxing music or go on iTunes and buy ONE new song you like ...(you get the idea).

DEPRESSION TALK AWARENESS—

DON'T BELIEVE ALL OF YOUR THOUGHTS

Learn to become aware of your own "depression talk". What are the thought patterns that you go to automatically when your mood is low? Start by just noticing when you are having a negative or self-critical thought, and wondering to yourself, "could that be depression talking?" Just the act of noticing your thoughts will start to give you a little more power over them. Some people try journaling from their depression voice to see what depression is saying to them and to learn more about their depression. Some people find it is helpful to talk back to the depression with more positive thoughts. Learn to recognize, those are just thoughts, it's not the truth – don't buy into it. The thoughts then start to lose their power.

DO SOMETHING PRODUCTIVE EACH DAY (EVEN IF IT'S SMALL)

Make a list of short tasks and try to do one each day. Clean your room, wash your dishes, update your Facebook page, call a friend to see how their day was, walk your dog or your neighbor's dog, (you get the idea!) At the end of the day, write down three things you accomplished that you feel good about (even if it is just "I made this list.").

NUTRITION

- try to eat regular meals even if you don't really feel like it
- try to eat protein throughout the day, especially at breakfast
- consider vitamin B-complex supplements
- consider vitamin D3 supplements (especially if it is winter); you can get your vitamin D levels tested by your family physician, but research indicates many people in Minnesota are low on Vitamin D, which has a direct effect on mood
- try not to rely on sugar and caffeine for mood boosts; instead try to eat lots of complex carbs that will keep your blood sugar level steady
- be aware if you are "emotionally eating" as a way to comfort yourself, which is common with depression; if this is the case it is especially important to be kind to yourself rather than getting down on yourself, just use this as information that you are feeling depressed, and see if you can sometimes do something else to comfort yourself other than using food

PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR RELATIONSHIP ENERGY

Are you spending a lot of time with people who are really negative? With people who criticize you a lot or subtly put you down? With people who are really needy but don't give a lot back to you? With people who are always having some big drama or emergency? With people who gossip a lot? With people you don't trust?

Or are you choosing to spend your time with people who really listen to you and how you are doing, who encourage and support you, who are positive about other people, who don't get caught up in drama all the time. Do you spend time with people who make pretty good choices about how they cope with stress? With people you feel safe with, and can just be yourself around (even if "yourself" that day is kind of down and sad?)

USE ART

Do something creative, even for just a little bit. This could be as simple as getting a coloring book and crayons out, or finding a photo you took of a friend and making them a card, or photoshopping some art, doing a scrapbook page, going and playing a piano in one of the practice rooms, grabbing a friend's guitar, writing a poem....maybe there is something you used to love doing and haven't done lately? Or something you've always

wanted to try? You could even just go to one of the art galleries on campus and appreciate some art, or go hear some live music at the Cedar Cultural Center.

SPIRITUALITY

If you have a spiritual community, now might be a good time to get reconnected. Maybe there is a favorite book that reminds you of what is really important to you that you want to reread or keep around. Maybe you have a spiritual friend or mentor that could help you talk through your current struggles. Maybe you just need more time in nature if that is something that spiritually connects you. Maybe you want to try something new, like the student Mindfulness Club that supports students in practicing mindfulness techniques. You can also find resources for practicing mindfulness meditation online (see the CWC website, or if you have a smartphone, try one of the free apps such as the Headspace app).

If you find you are questioning your faith or spiritual values, that's okay too (and according to researcher Sharon Parks, part of normal, healthy college student faith development). Find someone that you feel safe talking to about that (maybe your counselor can help you brainstorm), and Pastor Sonja and Pastor Justin at Campus Ministry are always happy to talk with students of any faith background, or no faith, about their spiritual questions and concerns – they provide compassionate, non-judgmental, confidential listening, support, and pastoral care.

MEDICATION

Short-term (4-6 months) of anti-depressant medication, in combination with counseling, can be very helpful in turning around depression. This is especially important to consider if you are really not functioning in your day to day life (for example, having trouble getting out of bed, sleeping poorly, not eating much, getting way behind in classes and not doing your homework, or having lots of suicidal thoughts). If you use medication wisely and in consultation with a knowledgeable doctor, you may find that it is helpful with minimal side effects. Some people who have a particularly “small” genetic “container” for serotonin find that medication is helpful on a longer-term basis. If this is the case, it is especially important that you develop as many positive ways as possible for keeping your serotonin “container” full, however, as medications over the long-term lose effectiveness over time and have to be increased, which increases the possibility of side effects. You can minimize your long-term use of anti-depressant medication by practicing good self-care.

MAKE SURE THERE ISN'T ANOTHER PHYSICAL PROBLEM

You may want to schedule an annual physical with your family physician if you haven't lately, even if you aren't interested in medication. Your physician could rule out other physiological causes of depression, such as hypo-thyroidism, which is pretty common (especially in women). If you are a woman and are on hormonal birth control, you may

want to check with your gynecologist or family physician to determine if the birth control hormones might be contributing to your issues with mood.

STAND UP TO PROCRASTINATION

Become aware of your own “cycle” of procrastination – putting off schoolwork, feeling the sense of impending doom as it hangs over your head, then perhaps having trouble getting started on a paper because you are so overwhelmed from putting it off, or having to stay up all night before a paper is due and missing sleep (or missing class). This process could be a contributor to depression if it is happening in your life.

Some helpful strategies for dealing with procrastination:

- try breaking a major paper or project down into steps and putting these steps into your planning calendar ahead of time.
- if you know you have work to do but find yourself procrastinating (going on Facebook or Instagram yet one more time, or cleaning your room for the 3rd time, or talking to friends); sit down and answer this question: What do I need right now? What do I really need right now? If the answer is, I need to get some work done, then choose to do it.
- reward yourself when you follow through on a goal
- seek support from one of the academic coaches in the Academic Skills Office on campus – they can help you identify better study strategies, time management, and skills for dealing with procrastination

DEALING WITH INSOMNIA

Some helpful strategies for dealing with insomnia:

- exercise in the morning or late afternoon (not after 7pm or you may have more difficulty falling asleep)
- do not spend “screen time” for at least an hour, preferably two, before bed
- if you find you are worrying a lot when you go to bed, take some intentional “productive worry time” earlier in the day (either go for a walk and just think, talk to a friend, or journal about what you are worried about or make a “to do” list – do not do this right before bed!)
- use a relaxation technique in the evening and when you go to bed (such as a “progressive relaxation” where you tense and release the muscles in your body, starting with your head and working towards your feet); it can be helpful to just focus on your breathing and let yourself breathe slowly and deeply
- try a guided imagery CD such as Naparstek’s “Healthy Sleep” (available for checkout at the reserve desk of the library under Center for Wellness & Counseling; or for purchase and download at healthjourneys.com)
- resist napping during the day as this may interfere with your ability to fall asleep at night

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