

A Survivor's Guide to
Depression:
Preventing, Coping, and Recovering



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Introduction

I'm a 25-year survivor of periodic bouts of depression – sometimes mild to moderate and manageable, sometimes severe and very debilitating. I've probably had about 12 depressive episodes in that period lasting from a couple of months to 6 to 7 months. Over the years, I've been through a lot of different treatment options to recover from depression: anti-depressant medications, individual therapy, group therapy, a 4 months-long “intensive outpatient program” (Solutions Treatment Center, Santa Fe, NM) and a 30-day in-patient program (Sierra Tucson, Tucson, AZ). I've also done a fair amount of research on depression and have read a lot of self-help books both during and in between my bouts of depression.

When it comes to dealing with depression, I don't claim to have all the answers. Nobody has all those answers, and everyone's depression is different. But I think I've developed a significant amount of understanding of and, therefore, wisdom around depression and how to deal with it. I offer what I have found helpful and effective in this guide to those who struggle with depression and those whose loved ones are dealing with depression. Recovering from depression is not “one size fits all”. Some of the measures I suggest you may not find very helpful. But hopefully you will find at least some of them useful.

In the arena of mental illnesses, my story is depression. While I'm knowledgeable about the other mental illnesses (anxiety, bi-polar, post-traumatic stress disorder, etc.), I have not personally experienced those conditions. This guide is about depression. Nevertheless, I wouldn't be

surprised if it was helpful to those that experience other mental illnesses.

I've tried to present this so it's applicable to those that deal with mild depression all the way to those that experience severe, quite debilitating depression.

Being able to implement some of the measures will require a certain minimum level of energy and motivation on your part – energy and motivation that you may or may not have on any given day. That's OK. Like many things in life, depression is best dealt with “one day at a time”. The key is to do what you can on the better days, praise yourself for having taken even small measures to cope with your depression, and be very gentle and understanding toward yourself on those days where you can't find the strength to do much of anything.

Why “Preventing, Coping, and Recovering”? I have found that the strategies I offer have helped me with all three.

Preventing: The perspectives and methods I offer have kept me emotionally healthier and happier during my times in-between bouts of depression. I can't say for sure, but it wouldn't surprise me that being more emotionally grounded day-in-and-day-out has helped keep depression at bay. I don't fool myself that I'll never experience another bout of depression, but I feel good that I'm living my life in way that may indeed lessen the probability and/or severity of future occurrences. Coping: Depression can be quite a painful experience. When we try to “take charge of our depression”, rather than just allow ourselves to be more of a passive sufferer, that makes us feel better about ourselves and, therefore, helps us better cope. In addition, many strategies (exercising, getting out in nature) are

proven mood enhancers themselves. Recovering: I can't say for sure that implementing these strategies has shortened my depressive episodes, but I have a strong feeling that they have.

Disclaimer: I don't have a master's in social work and am not a licensed therapist. My thoughts and advice are in no way meant to replace getting professional help. They're meant to supplement the professional help you're already getting or will get, hopefully, very soon. As of the spring of 2019, I am a "Certified Peer Support Worker" by the New Mexico Human Services Department – a training and certification for people in recovery (from mental illness and/or addictions) who want to work or volunteer in the behavioral health sector.

A Key Concept in Emotional Health and Happiness: "Connection"

More and more I'm reading about how important "connection" is to human happiness. And that a lack of connection can be a major contributing factor in one's depression. I believe that maintaining, creating or re-establishing connection in one's life can really help one cope during a depressive episode and may help accelerate recovery. It certainly is a very helpful thing in everyone's day-to-day life and may foster true lasting happiness. I think of connection in four ways:

Connection with Yourself: This is about being at peace with and loving who you are. But, also, importantly, liking yourself. Fully embrace that you are a unique individual and are worthy just the way you are – worthy of love and respect, and happiness. You have your own suite of

qualities, perspectives, abilities, etc. that nobody else has quite the way you do. And for some of us that struggle with things that we've done (or should have done) in the past, most importantly, you are worthy of being forgiven. More specifically, you are worthy of forgiving yourself. For some, it's a matter of wishing we had made different choices in life – chosen a different path. For others, it's a matter of having done (or are even still doing) specific things or have had behaviors that we regret, feel awful about, maybe even feel guilty or ashamed about. But that does not make us a “bad person”. It's become kind of a “corny” phrase, but today really is the first day of the rest of your life. It's important to understand and learn from our past, but not let it be our “ball and chain” preventing us from the happiness we deserve. Nothing good can come from obsessing over or spending a lot of energy regretting the past because, of course, we can't change it. “Let go or be dragged.” a friend of mine said. It helps to be at peace with yourself to assist or be of service to others. Being of service to others is a key part of “connection with others.”

Connection with Others: Humans are social beings. We need to be around people. Studies have shown that we benefit from the energy of being around each other even in a non-verbal context (group meditating, a yoga class, sitting together in a theater, etc.) Our “civilized” world has become increasingly isolating. The frenetic pace of the information age has made it worse. While the volume of our interacting with others has increased 10 times or more, the “human-ness” of those interactions seems to have decreased dramatically. I certainly spend a fair amount of time on Facebook, but here's what I say about

it, “Facebook: where everyone is connected and no one is in touch.” Electronic communicating (social media, texting) does not take the place of in-person interaction with other people (where you literally are “in touch” with a handshake or a hug). Even a phone conversation is more “human”, if you will, than a string of one sentence texts. An important part of “connection with others” is belonging to one or more social or volunteer groups that meet regularly: a support group, singing class, church or other place of worship, 12 step group, groups around sports or hobbies, etc. - a group where you look forward to seeing other people you’ve gotten to know and they look forward to seeing you. The importance of “belonging” can’t be understated. A close relative of belonging is the fellowship that being part of a group offers. Some people limit the concept of fellowship to being a part of a church but it exists in any group where its members like, respect and care for each other.

Connection with the Natural World: Whether or not you have a spiritual orientation to Earth or nature, we all can agree that Earth is our home and the ultimate source of our lives. For hundreds of thousands of years, humans were intricately and intimately tied to nature. It was both natural and a necessity to survive. It’s only in the last 100 years or so that we humans have primarily become indoor beings. We’re not nearly as in touch with the rhythms of nature as we used to be – sunrises and sunsets, phases of the moon, the seasons, the sensation of the sun on our skin, growing our own food, birds singing in the morning, the feel and sound of the wind, the night sky, plants re-emerging in the spring and the presence of animals, small and large. Starting with the industrial age and with the

more recent information age, it seems that our isolation from nature is greater than ever. This has not been healthy for our emotional well-being. A key aspect of preventing and coping with depression is to consciously reconnect with the natural world in ways that work for you.

Connection with Spirit: I hesitated to include this form of connection because not everyone can relate to, let alone embrace, the notion of a “spirit” or “higher power.” If you’re an atheist or agnostic and reject the notion of a higher power, that’s fine. Don’t let this paragraph upset you! Some people who reject religion find a certain connection with nature that can resemble spirituality. Go with that, if that’s you! As I point out elsewhere in this guide, I find it helpful in life to “Take what works for you and leave the rest!” Many people, however, are deeply spiritual or religious and find it to be quite grounding and nurturing. If this describes you, be sure to maintain or even enhance your connection with God or spirit during your struggles with depression.

Take Charge of Your Depression!

This is a key concept: to “take charge of your depression.” The act of consciously taking actions to feel better, to recover from depression can be very empowering. When depressed, it’s not exactly easy to feel like “taking charge” of anything. If your experience resembles mine, you’re constantly exhausted. You feel awful, often especially about yourself, and you may feel an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness. It’s not easy to “take charge” under those circumstances. If you reach deep down inside and find the strength to embrace and act on the suggestions in

this guide, you may experience an improvement in your emotional state that you appreciate. But, if you need to, start off slowly. Adopt a few of these measures in “baby steps” and add one or two more as you find the strength.

1. **Be Patient:** Unfortunately, bouts of depression can last quite a while. Three to five months is not uncommon, sometimes even longer. None of these suggested measures, alone or in combination, are a “magic bullet” that will make your depression go away quickly. But I’ve found they help with coping with depression, making it quite a bit more tolerable along the way. And I believe that they help one to recover from depression and help “keep depression at bay” during the times in between depressive episodes.

2. **Don’t Isolate:** This relates to the “Connection with Others” discussed above and is extremely important for people who live alone and/or those that don’t have the automatic social environment of a workplace or educational (i.e. school) setting. Even though I’m a big-time extrovert, when I’m dealing with depression, isolating is the main thing I tend to do. Pretty understandable. I feel awful. I feel awful about myself, and I don’t want anyone to see me that way. But isolating is probably the worst thing we depression sufferers can do, so we need to find the strength to overcome it – the best we can. Just do your best to at least socialize a little and praise yourself when you do. If you’re normally

somewhat of a “social butterfly” (like I am), don’t expect to be that way when you’re depressed. Just be who you are in that moment – which may be unusually shy, not very talkative, etc. If someone who knows you asks, “Are you OK? You seem a little off today.” or similar, just respond with something like, “I’m just not feeling real well today.”, which, of course, is true.

It’s totally understandable that some days you’re not up to socializing – but give it a go when you can. When my depression is quite bad, sometimes I don’t know if I’m going to be OK in a social setting, but I try to at least make an attempt at going to that social gathering, class, public forum, etc. Here’s 3 outcomes that I’ve experienced when I have made the effort: 1) I go to the event, at least somewhat “rise to the occasion” and enjoy myself (all things considered) and am glad that I went. The little “lift” I got from socializing made me feel better. 2) I get to the event and realize within half an hour or so that I just can’t handle being there, and I go home. So be it. 3) I get ready for the event and either sit in my car in my driveway or start driving to the event, and breakdown and realize that I won’t be able to handle it. So be it. When #2 or #3 happens, I try to at least praise myself for making the effort. Of course, if your depression is manageable and you’re still able to be at work or school, you’re getting that socializing automatically – which is a good thing!

3. Get Out of the House! A close cousin of “Don’t Isolate!”. This can sometimes be a tough one, because, when we’re depressed, we need to be in a “safe place” and often, the only place we feel safe is at home. Nevertheless, try your best to get out of the house for at least part of your day. Ideally, that would involve socially interacting with other people, but, if you’re not up for that, at least being around the energy of other people is quite helpful. Even when I’ve been extremely socially reclusive, I’ve found that going to the library to read and/or do things on my laptop is much better than doing the same at home. Working out at the gym (rather than at home or going for run) is also a way of both getting out of the house and at least being around others even if you don’t interact with anyone. With a fat marker, I have often written a “Get Out of the House!” sign and posted it on my bulletin board in my kitchen. I must confess that even when I’ve suffered from severe depression, I’ve never been completely bed ridden. I’ve been able to at least make it to my couch in the living room (!!) and am usually good at getting out of the house at least once during the day. Your situation is likely different than mine. If just getting out of bed is an accomplishment on certain days, be satisfied with that. It’s important to do your best but also be gentle and forgiving with yourself with respect to what you are and are not able to do each day.

4. **Be Wary of Social Media:** When dealing with depression, there are potential benefits and pitfalls of being on social media like Facebook (FB). On the plus side, there are several mental health support groups on FB that can be quite helpful and help you feel not so alone in your struggle. I encourage you to check those out. Even still, I don't think these on-line support groups take the place of attending support groups in person.

The downside to sites like FB lies in spending a lot of time reading others' (like your FB friends') posts. In this context, research has found that time spent on social media tends to make depressed people feel more depressed. Most of us dealing with depression have significant "I'm not worthy" low self-esteem. We tend to think that everyone else is extremely competent, attractive, popular, happy, etc., and we compare ourselves with them. Think about it. Almost all personal-related Facebook posts convey extremely positive things about the person posting. "Look how....popular I am, happy I am, athletic or fit I am, happy with my new job, on a great vacation, in a new wonderful relationship." Understandably, everybody puts their "best foot forward" in presenting themselves on social media. When you're depressed, it can make you feel worse about yourself because you can't help but compare your situation with how happy and "great" everyone else seems. Facebook can be a form of "connecting" with others, but I think getting together with close friends or family in person, on the phone,

or even by e-mail is a much better option than subjecting yourself to the “life is great” fantasy world that Facebook tends to be. Besides, there’s also a lot of negative ugly political stuff on FB that we don’t need to subject ourselves to when we’re depressed.

5. **Avoid the News:** Whether from TV, newspapers, or on-line, 90+% of news is usually negative: murders, car crashes, wars, mean-spirited political stuff, etc. You don’t need to subject yourself to any of that when you’re depressed!

6. **Get Outside!** This follows up on the “Connection with the Natural World” theme. I’m a firm believer in “Eco-Therapy” and there’s evidence to back this up. I like to call nature the original therapist! The Japanese believe in the healing power of nature. They call it “Shinrin-Yoku” – literally meaning “forest bathing”. Studies have demonstrated that spending time in nature enhances physical and mental health. Going for a hike in the mountains is excellent because you’re getting both exercise and spending time in nature. But not everyone likes to hike and even those that do often don’t have the time to regularly head for the hills. Not to worry. The benefits of being outside await you just outside your front door or your place of work! A twenty to thirty-minute walk in the morning (before work if you’re working) or during your lunch hour can really help.

Ideally, do not bring along the distraction of your cell phone. The idea is to just be “present” – notice the trees blowing in the wind, the birds flying around, ants on the sidewalk, your neighbors’ landscaping. Another great form of eco-therapy is playing in the dirt – i.e. gardening or landscaping. Studies have shown that soil has serotonin – a naturally-occurring chemical in the brain that is a mood enhancer! If you’re outdoors alone, it’s a chance to be aware of the wonders of nature. If you’re outdoors with a friend or two, then you get a “two-fer” – connecting with nature and other people. Getting outdoors earlier in the day is good as the benefits of it can help you make it through the rest of your day. Honoring a sunrise or sunset every now and then can be quite special. I often grab my coffee and go outside 10 to 15 minutes before sunrise to enjoy the subtle first light of day. Remember, getting outside is mostly about connecting with nature, not engaging in challenging exercise – which, obviously, you may not have the energy for. Just sitting and “being” outside for a while can really help.

7. **Move Your Body!** Any form of exercise will help make you feel better about yourself. It also naturally gets you to breathe deeply – a mood enhancer. If you’re out-of-shape or not the exercise type, even a 20 to 30 minute walk will work wonders – getting that heart rate up even a little for a while. For those more exercise prone, I’m a big fan of 30-50 minutes of aerobic exercise every day – where I’m getting and keeping my

heart rate up (and sweating!) for an extended period. If you've heard of the "runner's high", it's a real thing. The endorphins that aerobic exercise produce are natural mood enhancers, and they can last for a few hours after you finished exercising. When my depression has been particularly bad, I've really appreciated the little "lift" exercising gives me for a few hours. It's not like I feel great, but I certainly feel better for a while. Stationary bikes and elliptical machines at a gym are great options if running or swimming aren't your thing. As with spending some time outdoors, if you can exercise in the morning, the benefits will help your mood into the afternoon. I realize it can be hard to get motivated to exercise because one of the biggest symptoms most of us struggle with is fatigue. Just do your best. Somedays you might find the energy to exercise and other days maybe not. That's fine. Remember, even a 5 to 10-minute walk around your neighborhood will help.

- 8. Individual Therapy:** When I've been depressed, once a week individual therapy has been really helpful – sometimes even twice per week. Therapists can help you understand your depression, the reasons why you might be depressed, provide suggestions on handling your depression and just, in general, be a helpful, confidential "sounding board" for what you're going through. Therapy will help you understand the cause(s) of your depression and how to accept and cope with those causes. Anti-depressant

medications may help you “manage” your depression, but they won’t provide the cognitive and emotional context for why you’re experiencing depression. Picking a therapist that you like and feel like you’re “connecting with” can sometimes be a challenge. Ask friends or family if they have any recommendations. And if, at some point, you don’t feel like your therapist is working for you, don’t be afraid to find another therapist. They’re a professional you’re paying to help you!

9. **Group Therapy:** I have gotten a lot out of group therapy. That’s where 6-12 people who are also struggling with mental health issues meet and learn about each other’s struggles – usually facilitated by a licensed therapist. As with individual therapy, everything that’s said in group therapy is confidential and does not leave the room. Attendees usually pledge their confidentiality. Group therapy can be helpful and quite powerful in ways totally different than individual therapy. You get reassurance that “You’re not alone” in your struggle with depression: that other people just like you are going through the same thing. If a participant consents to it, other participants can react to and provide insights on what the person “sharing” said. Often, the feedback I’ve gotten in group therapy has been enormously helpful. Similarly, sometimes I’ve provided feedback to others, and they later expressed how much it helped them. Some groups are not limited to those dealing with mental health issues like depression,

anxiety or bi-polar disorder. Often, they include those struggling with alcoholism, substance abuse and other addictions. But don't let that discourage you as it all seems to work out just fine. The unconditional support and compassion for each other that exists in group therapy is huge.

Finding therapy groups can sometimes be tough. I remain surprised that there aren't more of them being offered. Ask your individual therapist. Also, most "intensive outpatient programs. (called "IOPs") focus on group therapy. In many areas, the National Alliance on Mental Illness has support groups usually run by volunteers.

10. Ignore Those Negative Voices Inside Your

Head! For most, the low self-esteem and self-loathing that goes with depression can be intense – downright awful. Those negative voices inside our head ("You're a failure. You're a bad person. You're not worthy of love." etc.) seem to create a reality for us that can be hard to escape. But it's important to realize that perceived reality in our heads, is not real. It's just some silly little voices in our heads that don't know what the heck they're talking about! Popular sayings along these lines are, "We're our own worst critic." and "Don't believe everything you think." Ignoring those voices is not always easy, but if you at least consciously recognize that those voices are not "you", it can lessen their impact. Try to think of yourself and treat yourself as you would your best friend. If your best friend had traits, did things or had behaviors that he or she felt remorse about, would you scold or criticize him or her, or

would you be compassionate and try to understand and help? Particularly when we're struggling with depression, we need to be our own best friend.

Whether it's the voices inside my head or just a general feeling I have, there's something about depression that makes me feel like I will always feel the way I do when I'm depressed - that it will never really go away. Even though I've successfully recovered from depression multiple times now, the intensity of depression is so strong that I feel like the pain and sadness of it will always be with me. This is a tough one. I consciously know I can and will recover because I have many times before. But emotionally it feels like some sort of curse that I'm stuck with. I just do my best to keep telling myself that I've been here before and have pulled out of it before. Again, be patient and gentle with yourself. Depression can linger for much longer than we'd like it to (I wish it was more like food poisoning that's gone in 24 hours!), but it will go away. You will feel good again.

At some point, you may find a way to silence those voices. Many have found prayer, meditation and/or breathing techniques to help achieve that blessing. But in the meantime, you can do your best to ignore them. When those voices get particularly "loud", various distractions (e.g. via the measures in this guide) can help.

- 11. Self-help Reading:** Reading, in general, can help take your mind off your depression. I don't

recommend anything too “heavy” and certainly nothing, fiction or non-fiction, that is negative, dark and/or has a lot of violence. More specifically, I have found reading one of the myriad self-help books to assist me in dealing with my depression. There are a bazillion out there. Your therapist might have some good suggestions, as well as friends. Sometimes I’ve gone to the self-help section of a local bookstore and read the descriptions and reviews of some. Then I pick one. While they all haven’t been great, rarely have I regretted what I read. One of my all-time favorites is “Emotional Sobriety” by Tian Dayton. Another type of useful book is what I call the “personal growth/personal journey” novel. There’s plenty of those, too. Paul Coehlo (author of “The Alchemist”, now a classic) has written quite a few of those. My mom introduced me to “The Good Earth”, written in 1931 by Nobel Prize winner Pearl S. Buck. A classic!

12. Healthy Diet: I’m not suggesting that you dramatically change your diet during your depression. But try to eat as healthy (lots of greens and fruits!) as possible and avoid the processed “junk foods” as much as you can – especially those with sugar (candies, desserts) and high fructose corn syrup (sodas). Studies suggest sugar can exacerbate depression. <https://psychcentral.com/blog/why-sugar-is-dangerous-to-depression/> Some say, “We are what we eat.” There’s no question that the healthiness of what we eat and drink to make our bodies run affects both our

physical and mental health. Some people find certain supplements helpful with depression – such as niacin (Vitamin B-3) and magnesium. I'd advise checking with your psychiatrist or doctor before you start heavily dosing yourself with supplements – especially if you're already taking anti-depressants.

13. Go Easy on the Alcohol and Drugs: Even if you're not an alcoholic or addicted to drugs, either can make your depression worse, even in moderation. Most of them are, themselves, depressants. The short-term "lift" or high you might get for a while will likely later be replaced with feeling worse than you did before and for a fairly long time. Even when I was a practicing marijuana addict, I found the will to quit smoking pot when I was depressed. Unfortunately, I returned to smoking it habitually once I felt good again.

14. Volunteer/Be of Service to Others: Low self-esteem and self-worth are often painfully present during bouts of depression. Volunteering to help others in need can be a nice way to help feel better about yourself when you're depressed. Ideally, your volunteering would involve simple, non-intellectually demanding activities – like at a soup kitchen, animal shelter, 12 step meeting, intake at a homeless shelter, church activities, etc. If you find the energy to volunteer even a few hours a week, that's great! Just be careful not to commit to too many hours and end up overdoing it.

15. Embrace Acceptance: There's a lot going on in the world and in our day-to-day lives that we find upsetting, but we have virtually no control over. We often obsess over those things which we can't control and that ultimately bring us down – making us vulnerable to becoming depressed again or worsening our depression. For years, the violence, injustice and oppression going on in the world really got to me. It made me both really sad and angry and was definitely fuel for my depression. Yet, of course, I couldn't singlehandedly change any of those things. Somehow, some way, I found a way to accept those things that I could not change. This concept is embodied within the **Serenity Prayer: "Spirit (some people use "God") grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."** The Serenity Prayer is integral in 12 Step meetings that focus on addictions and sobriety, but embracing it has enormous benefits in everyday life.

Accepting does not mean that you become apathetic – that you stop caring about the things that are important to you. It just means that we accept reality – that we can't change a lot of things in the world or in our backyards that we'd like to. Accepting also does not mean becoming complacent. With our own individual actions, we can help contribute to positive change. Acceptance is important in human relationships and interactions

as well. The fact that somebody is mean or hurtful to us is beyond our control. We usually can't control how people treat us or what they say to us. We can only control how we let it affect us – whether we take it personally and let it injure us or whether we accept that someone else's anger or mean-spiritedness has nothing to do with us at all.

16. Embrace Gratitude: When we're really depressed, it can feel like every part of our life is terrible. We fixate, even obsess on the parts of our lives that are awful (whether real or imagined) and forget that our lives still have a lot of good in them – that we have a lot to be thankful or grateful for. Many therapists encourage their clients to make “gratitude lists”, noting all the good aspects of our lives: friends or family members that care about us, healthy children, a decent job that at least pays the bills, hobbies or sports that you enjoy (at least when you're not depressed!), their pets, their gardens, one's physical health. The gratitude list can include big and small things. A gratitude list won't “save the day” or magically make you feel completely better again. But it will help you recognize that there are still a lot of positive things going on in your life at a time when things feel pretty dismal. Once you've made it, review your gratitude list frequently and add to it if you feel so inspired. Similar to a gratitude list, many people find daily journaling helpful; putting your thoughts and feelings down in writing can help you understand and deal with them. Having written

those feelings down can be helpful when you share what's been going on with you with your therapist.

17. Praise Yourself Every Time You Take Charge of

Your Depression! When you engage various strategies, whether in this guide or others, to deal with your depression, don't take that for granted. Praise yourself for actively taking measures to get better – however small some of those measures may seem. Depression can be really, really tough. Duh! The combination of fatigue, low self-esteem and despair can be extremely challenging. Each time you find the strength to “do something about it” is a cause for celebration (or at least praise!). That time I decided to go to a social function but only made it to the driver's seat of my car before I started crying and had to go back into the house, I patted myself on the back for at least giving it a try. I did not declare “defeat” because I didn't make it to the function. The act of taking several measures to feel better, to recover from depression is, in itself, a very positive strategy – and that benefit is enhanced when you recognize and give yourself credit for having done so.

Additional Important Topics

Suicidal Thoughts: Suicide is probably the most irreversible decision a person can make.

Obviously, two months later you can't change your mind and decide you want to be alive again. I'm not trying to be funny. The finality of suicide cannot be

underestimated. Among my many bouts of depression, I would say a couple of times I was truly suicidal. The continued pain of depression was intense. I really didn't want to be on this planet anymore. I was thinking about taking my life and how I would do it constantly. Thankfully, I never tried. And, now, I feel grateful every day that I didn't. From interactions with depression sufferers and research I've done, a similar "feeling of relief and gratitude" is common for those that thought about or attempted suicide. They regained their mental health and found a way to appreciate life. That doesn't mean they never experienced depression again. It means that they found a way to cope with their depression and find true joy in life during the times in-between.

Depression can be pretty awful. But the good news is that you can get better and feel good, again. This can be hard to embrace or accept particularly during your first or first couple of episodes of depression. As I've mentioned, the feelings can be so intense that it seems like you will always feel that way. That it's impossible to recover from an emotional condition that feels that intense and pervasive. Those are your negative internal voices that, thankfully, don't know what they're talking about. With treatment and some determination on your part, you can recover and be content again. It's important to realize and keep telling yourself that. Even if you can't currently see "a light at the end of the tunnel", it is indeed there shining brightly for you. You may just have to round a few more

bends in the track (through therapy, other strategies, and time) before you see the light and keep your focus on recovery to reach the light.

It's common to feel embarrassed or even ashamed of feeling suicidal, and, therefore, not want to tell anyone about it. But it's critical that you tell someone! The first time I was suicidal, I told no one – not my friends or family, not even my psychiatrist or therapist. I lied that I wasn't suicidal when asked directly. That's how ashamed I was. But there is nothing to be ashamed of. Depression is an illness that takes us to places emotionally we never knew even existed – and those places can be quite dark. Looking back, it was ridiculous that I didn't admit to my psychiatrist or therapist that I was suicidal. After all, they were the mental health professionals I was paying to get better! Please, if you have thoughts of suicide running in your head, let someone know – even if you think they're just “mild” thoughts and you know you'll never “do it.” If your suicidal thoughts are intense, call 911 or a suicide hotline. The National Alliance for Mental Illness (<https://www.nami.org>) has a national helpline, (800) 950-6264 or text “NAMI” to 741741.

Anti-Depressant Medications: I am not a mental health professional, so my thoughts on anti-depressants are not in any way a replacement for getting professional advice. The decision to take or not take anti-depressants is a personal one. I would never, ever discourage anyone from taking anti-depressants. I feel that they have helped me,

particularly when my depression was quite bad. To be clear, anti-depressant medications are not a replacement for individual therapy or counseling. The meds can help get you through tough times, but they won't help you understand why you're depressed nor assist you with creating a more emotionally supportive life. That's where therapy is so critical.

In the first few years of dealing with depression, I was very resistant to taking "meds" though my reasons weren't entirely clear to me. I just thought I could get better without them. My sister, Sharon, helped me realize that some illnesses require medication. She would say, "If you had diabetes, of course you would take insulin.", so if I had the illness of depression, taking an antidepressant also made sense. There seems to be a lot of articles out these days criticizing anti-depressants and even chastising those who take them. This, frankly, really upsets me. While I think there's some truth to the notion that our society in general is "over-medicating", anti-depressants are truly helping millions of depression sufferers.

A few things about anti-depressants that I've encountered: 1) They're best prescribed by a psychiatrist and not your general doctor. Psychiatrists know a lot more about all the anti-depressants than regular doctors. 2) Unfortunately, even when prescribed by a psychiatrist, finding an anti-depressant that works for you, is somewhat "trial and error". Don't be surprised or discouraged

if the first one you try doesn't help much. 3) Most anti-depressants can take 3-5 weeks to start having a positive effect. That's why, if you're going to take them, it's best to take them sooner into your depression than later. 4) Anti-depressants can be tough to "get on" and get used to in the first week or so. You can have weird symptoms that go away once your body gets accustomed to it. Most psychiatrists will start you on an extremely low dosage that you ramp up slowly over time to make that transition easier. 5) Most anti-depressants have side effects, but they're usually manageable, often just mild. 6) Never stop taking your meds "cold turkey". Your body can literally and dangerously freak out. Ramp your dosage down under the direction of your doctor.

Pets and Animals: There's something real about "pet therapy". Pets (mostly dogs) are being used to comfort people dealing with PTSD, that are in hospice care, cancer patients in hospitals, the elderly in nursing homes, etc. If you already have a pet, you're set! If not, consider adding the companionship of a pet to your life. If you're not currently able to have a pet, your local animal shelter and/or Humane Society have volunteer positions for dog walkers, cat socializers, etc. It can be a great way to: get out of the house, get outside, volunteer, connect with others, etc.! The comfort of a pet can be extremely important for those that live by themselves. I often credit, only half-jokingly, my dog Tica for saving my life during my worst bout of depression in 2010.

Sleep: Getting a good night's sleep is extremely important, but, during depression, can be easier said than done. Insomnia is something I often struggle with when I'm depressed, and it's no fun at all. A lot of times, if I can, I take a long nap in the afternoon which at least partially helps make up for a poor night's sleep. Google "sleep guides" and make sure you're following the generally-accepted recommendations for restful sleep. Also, if you're over 40, you may want to consider a take-home sleep analyses that can determine whether you have sleep apnea.

Alcoholism, Substance Abuse, and Other Addictions: As I've mentioned, this guide focuses on dealing with depression. But the reality is, often addictions and depression play off of each other and many people struggle with both addictions and a mental illness. Addictions can drive having bouts of depression and depression can initiate or worsen addictions. I'm not going to address this topic much except to mostly say that life can be really challenging if you're burdened by and suffering with an addiction – especially if it's coupled with depression. For over two decades, I was addicted to marijuana. I know that being a marijuana addict, if not the actual reason for my depression, definitely added fuel to the fire. There's a lot of lying that goes with addictions because we're constantly having to lie and deceive to hide our addiction. And lying is a toxic behavior that makes us feel bad about ourselves – never helpful for depression.

I have gotten a lot out of 12 Step groups, like Alcoholics Anonymous (where at least in Santa Fe, welcome addicts beyond just alcoholics). Not everybody “connects” with 12 Step groups (Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, etc.), but I would suggest at least giving them a try if you struggle with an addiction. The support and fellowship in 12 Step groups cannot be understated. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous (and other 12 Step groups), take the “anonymous” aspect extremely seriously. When you first go to a meeting, you may feel uncomfortable that you know a few people at the meeting (and they know you). But, of course, they are there because they’re also in recovery from their addiction! Their presence there hopefully will make you feel more comfortable that you’re not alone in your addiction. If you go to a 12 Step meeting, you don’t have to introduce yourself or say anything if you don’t want to. At the very least, just sit in the meeting and be present – soaking up the energy of recovery and support that is all around you. I like the larger 20+ people meetings. Others like the smaller, more intimate meetings.

Take What Works for You and Leave the Rest: One of my mantras for life in general. Whether it’s the suggestions in this guide or things you hear at a support group meeting, try to focus on the things that you can relate to or find helpful or compelling. Let go of the things you can’t relate to, you disagree with, or can’t accept or that “really bug you”. For years, I focused on the things that I did not agree with or that really upset me, often

ignoring or not embracing the positive or helpful things that came my way. For some reason, I think a lot of us tend to be that way. Sometimes I've been in a 3-hour group therapy session where I only "received" one or two things I found helpful. I try to leave the session focusing on and embracing those one or two positive things. I let go of the things that I didn't agree with or that I couldn't relate to.

Closing Thoughts

I hope you've found at least some of the content in this guide helpful. In many ways, depression is one big mystery – even to mental health professionals. If you've never experienced depression yourself or have never (maybe until now) spent a lot of time with someone that is suffering with depression, it can be extremely hard to understand or empathize with. When I've been depressed, I would look at myself in the mirror and say, "Where did you go, Craig? When are you coming back? Are you coming back?" That's at least my reality in depression. The emotional pain that I've endured dwarfs any physical pain I've ever experienced. Life, in general, becomes incredibly overwhelming and, therefore, intimidating.

That's the unfortunate news. The positive news is that we can recover from depression and be happy, or at least reasonably so, again. The support from loving, caring, and concerned friends and family has made all the difference for me in recovering from depression. Seek out similar support in any way you can. Whether it's friends or family

or various social support groups out there, the help and concern you need is out there.

Family and close friends don't need to feel a responsibility to "rescue" their loved one dealing with depression, primarily because they probably won't be able to. The key is to simply be there for them in a supportive, unconditional way. Sometimes depression sufferers find simple tasks really challenging. If you're providing support to a depression sufferer, you may need to help them with things like finding a therapist or psychiatrist. Encourage them to get professional help and assist them with the "Take Charge of Your Depression" strategies in this guide. When my depression became dangerously dark in 2010, my close family members strongly encouraged me to go to a 30-day in-patient program. I was originally resistant to the idea as it seemed like such a "severe" option, but, of course, what I was dealing with from a mental health standpoint was quite severe. It saved my life and put me on a more grounded and content emotional path. I've, thankfully, had just a few bouts of depression since then.

I got over being embarrassed of or ashamed by my depression long ago, because there's absolutely no reason to be embarrassed or ashamed for having depression. It's a debilitating illness like many others out there. While it's gotten a lot better in the last two decades, there remains some stigma around depression that I hope, in my own small way, to help get rid of. One in five Americans endure a mental illness at some point in their lives. World-wide 300 million people are burdened with mental illness. Whether we realize it or not, we constantly encounter people struggling with depression in our daily lives.

For everyone dealing with depression, I wish you a full recovery and success at returning to or creating, possibly for the first time, a life of joy, compassion and happiness. I have sincere hope that you can. You deserve it.

Peace, Craig O'Hare

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