

10 Things I Do Every Day to Beat Depression

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From the moment my eyes open in the morning until the second that I pull my sleep mask over my face as I go to sleep, I am engaged in battle: I must protect myself with armor against ongoing negative intrusive thoughts that flood into my brain, while sending my prefrontal cortex — the home of logical thought — the green light to make decisions and to take charge of my brain's limbic system (the emotional hub). That is, before the amygdala (fear center) spazzes out.

I spend more time and energy chasing and maintaining good health than I do in any other aspect of my life — my marriage, family, work — because I know that everything meaningful and good around me depends on a stable base. I hope that one day I won't have to fight so hard for my sanity; however, until then, here is a list of things I do every day to beat depression.

1. Swim.

I start the day in the pool. I show up before I can even think about what I'm doing diving into ten feet of cold water loaded with chlorine with a bunch of other nutjobs. Tom Cruise believes that all a depressed person needs to do to get rid of the blues is to strap on a pair of running shoes. I think a few other steps are needed; however, exercise is the most powerful weapon I use every day to whack the demons.

If I go more than three days without working out, my thoughts turn very dark and I can't stop crying. All aerobic workouts release endorphins, while helping to block stress hormones and produce serotonin, our favorite neurotransmitter that can relieve depression.

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However swimming is particularly effective at shrinking panic and sadness because of the combination of stroke mechanics, breathing, and repetitiveness. It's basically a form of whole-body, moving meditation.

Volumes of research point to the benefits of exercise for mood, such as the study led by Dr. James A. Blumenthal, a professor of medical psychology at Duke University. He discovered that, among the 202 depressed people randomly assigned to various treatments, three sessions of vigorous aerobic exercise were approximately as effective at treating depression as daily doses of Zoloft, when the treatment effects were measured after four months.

2. Record my "joys."

A very wise person once told me to try to let go of the big thoughts ("Why do I suffer from depression?" "When will I feel better?" "Will I ever feel good again?") and concentrate instead on the little joys that happen throughout my day, to allow those unsuspecting moments of delight carry me over the ones fraught with anxiety and sadness. So each day I record in my mood journal a list of joys: a long swim with friends, my daughter's little hand in mine as we crossed a street, my son's proud expression after making a three-point basket, seven hours of sleep, a warm dinner.

This exercise forces me to be open to little joys, to collect them, and to have more appreciation for what is right in front of me. Psychologists like Sonja Lyubomirsky at the University of California Riverside say that keeping a gratitude journal (or a list of joys) can increase your energy and relieve pain and fatigue.

3. List my accomplishments.

I started to do this when I was too depressed to work. As someone who had always attached her self-esteem to career achievements, I felt completely worthless when I couldn't produce a single piece of writing. I read books by positive psychologists and happiness experts like Dan Baker, Ph.D., director of the Life Enhancement Program at Canyon Ranch, who said to start with small accomplishments, and build strength and confidence from there.

So my list would include things like: ate a full breakfast, took a shower, picked up the kids from school, called my mom, got groceries, wrote my husband a loving email, read a chapter of a book. Today, I make sure to record all my efforts toward good health: I list how many laps I swam, how many minutes I meditated, if I helped someone with his depression, or if I made a difficult food choice (ate a boring spinach salad at lunch when everyone was eating tasty calzones). I will record work feats (i.e., wrote a blog), but I make sure to balance out my list with the kinds of small but important accomplishments that I often dismiss (helped my son with his school project, talked to a friend about anxiety, had tea with my husband instead of rushing to work).

4. Laugh.

Charlie Chaplin once said, "To truly laugh, you must be able to take your pain and play with it." I suppose that's why some of the funniest people out there — Stephen Colbert, Art Buchwald, Robin Williams, Ben Stiller — have journeyed through periods of torment.

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There is an unspoken message hidden within a giggle that says this: "I promise, you'll get through this." In fact, New York City's Big Apple Circus has used humor to console sick children since 1986, when they started sending teams of clowns into hospital rooms with "rubber chicken soup" and other fun surprises.

Studies indicate that human beings can heal (at least partially) from a host of different illnesses if they learn how to laugh. For example, in 2006 researchers led by Lee Berk and Stanley A. Tan at Loma Linda University in Loma Linda, California, found that two hormones — beta-endorphins (which alleviate depression) and human growth hormone (HGH, which helps with immunity) — increased by 27 and 87 percent respectively when volunteers anticipated watching a humorous video. Simply anticipating laughter boosted health-protecting hormones and chemicals.

5. Meditate.

I've read more than 100 articles on how meditation can help relieve depression and anxiety. Research has shown that formal practices of meditation can halve the risk of future clinical depression in people who have already been depressed several times, its effects comparable to antidepressant medications.

I swear it's been the feature story of every health website at least once a week for the last five years. That's how long I've been trying to do it. Unsuccessfully. Until I enrolled in a mindfulness-based stress reduction ([MBSR](#)) program at the local hospital.

I have two more weeks to go before I graduate from meditation school and am far from wearing one of those radiant smiles that grace the faces of Tibetan monks; however, I have been able to follow through on my commitment of 20 minutes of meditation a day. Meditation, alone, doesn't take away all of my symptoms of depression as some studies suggest it can, but I think it's lengthening the time span between negative intrusive thoughts, or at least making my brain a less healthy environment for them to thrive.

6. Take DHA and vitamins.

Okay, this is coming from someone who gets vitamin catalogs sent to her house, but I believe that a brain armed with all the right nutrients is going to minimize your struggle with depression by at least 50 percent.

I start with 2,000 milligrams of DHA (Docosahexaenoic acid). That's a lot. But consider this: one-quarter of the brain is DHA.

David Perlmutter, M.D., names three reasons why you need extra DHA in his bestselling book "Grain Brain":

DHA is an important building block for the membranes surrounding brain cells, particularly the synapses, which lie at the heart of efficient brain function. Second, DHA is an important regulator of inflammation. It naturally reduces the activity of the COX-2 enzyme, which turns on the production of damaging inflammatory chemicals ... [And] DHA helps orchestrate the production, connectivity, and viability of brain cells while at the same time enhancing function.

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I also take *liquid* vitamin D and vitamin B 12 (because they are more easily absorbed that way), as well as iron, vitamin K2, vitamin C, calcium, and magnesium. Vitamin D and B Complex vitamins are especially important for optimal mental health.

7. Drink a power smoothie.

They say breakfast is the most important meal of the day, so I start off with a smoothie of kale, chard, spinach, or collard greens mixed with pineapple or strawberries. Then I add a potent probiotic, a powdery mix containing bacteria (yep, you read that right) that helps keep the intestines healthy and supports digestion.

Why? Because your brain is only as healthy as your gut. In fact, the nervous system of your intestines is so complex, including an estimated 500 million neurons, that neuroscientists often refer to the gut as the second brain.

The nerve cells in our gut manufacture 80 to 90 percent of our body's serotonin, the neurotransmitter we need to stay sane. That's more than our brain makes. The gut is in constant communication with the brain, sending it information that most definitely affects your mood, even as the messages never come to consciousness. If you have struggled with stomach and digestion issues like I have, you might be surprised to learn that some depression and anxiety symptoms can be relieved by attending to the gut and feeding it organisms that keep it happy.

8. Avoid sugar and grains.

Bestsellers "Grain Brain" by renowned neurologist David Perlmutter, M.D. and "Wheat Belly" by preventative cardiologist William Davis, M.D., should be required reading for anyone prone to depression and anxiety. Both authors explain that the cornerstone of all degenerative conditions — including depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder — is inflammation, and the most prominent stimulators of inflammation in our diet are gluten and sugar. We get into trouble because we can't feel the inflammation in our brain like we can in other parts of the body, so we rarely link a kind of food we eat with our mood.

Perlmutter points out that study after study demonstrates that people who suffer from mood disorders also tend to be gluten-sensitive and vice versa: depression is found in as many as 52 percent of gluten-sensitive individuals. This was the case with me. I got tested two months ago.

He also explains how we now have documented evidence proving the relationship between hemoglobin A1C (which indicates our average blood sugar) and the future risk of depression. Studies have shown that a diet that is low in carbohydrates and high in fat can improve symptoms of depression and schizophrenia.

9. Use my sun lamp.

This is by far the easiest thing I do on the list. Each morning I turn on the sun lamp on my desk. An hour later, I turn it off. It's relatively small for producing full-spectrum fluorescent light at an intensity of 10,000 lux. If I have spent a few hours outside, or if I know I will be, I don't bother.

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However, for most of the fall and winter months — and for the dark, rainy days during the spring and the summer — my sunbox helps me regulate my circadian rhythm, the body's internal biological clock that governs certain brain wave activity and hormone production. The fluctuation of natural light can cause mood-related chemicals to shift, causing depression in sensitive folks like myself. So if nature isn't giving me what I need, I give it to myself.

10. Pray.

Lots of folks lump meditation and prayer together. I think they are very different.

Meditation, for me, is a mental health exercise of being aware of my breath and staying in the present moment as much as possible. Prayer is my chat session with God.

I start by saying my three favorite prayers: "The Prayer of Saint Francis," "The Serenity Prayer," and "The Third Step Prayer." All of them basically say this: "Big Guy, I'm putting you in charge today because, just like yesterday, my brain feels like Chuck E. Cheese on Kids Eat Free Night. I'm hoping you can use my struggle and my pain for some greater cause, and, if not, please don't let me know that. Help me to see with eyes of faith, hope, and love, and to always err on the side of compassion."

Then I read a scripture passage, as well as a piece from a spiritual author, like Henri Nouwen. If I still have time, or if I'm especially anxious, I will pray the rosary over and over again, until I can catch my breath.

Image: 52kitchenadventures.com

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