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10 ways to deal with anxiety and depression

Ups and downs are a natural part of life. But what happens when the lows seem to come more frequently than the highs and each day we have to drag ourselves out of bed? Even in its mildest form, anxiety and depression can be frightening and have a miserable impact on our family life. We might find ourselves pushing through even when we know we should rest and take time out, simply because admitting we feel emotionally bleak feels like a kind of failure.



Because mental health is still relatively taboo, we might feel we're far more likely to receive sympathy if we have a cold or flu than if we say we're really struggling emotionally.

But the more we talk about mental health, the less taboo it becomes. And those who have experienced depression and anxiety know that one of the best ways of dealing with it is recognising the trigger signs. As soon as we have a hint that our mood is slipping away to the dark side, we can then take positive steps to comfort and soothe ourselves. Far from being a sign of failure, this is actually an incredibly empowering choice. We are recognising that right now things don't feel good, and taking steps to do something about it. Talking to our kids about our emotions opens up a space for them to express their own. It's far healthier to be aware that life is complex and our emotions equally so, than to hide our sorrows behind fake smiles and press on with a Pollyanna approach.

Here are ten ways to actively combat mild depression when we feel it creeping into our lives. Some might work for you and some might not: the trick is to create a toolbox of ideas and activities that you know are healing for you as an individual.

1. Keep a record of the little things

You know that life is good but right now you just can't see it. Keeping a journal or scrapbook of favourite moments, snapshots, things your kids say, special memories and reasons to be grateful can be a huge source of comfort when the going gets tough. Even in your bleakest hours, there are usually pinpricks of light: a tender conversation, a beautiful view in nature. Capture these moments like someone creating a museum and consider it your own personal museum of joy.

2. Move your body



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Research shows that exercise is one of the best ways to boost your mood as it releases endorphins – feel-good hormones. But exercising can feel like a bridge too far when we're feeling really low, and often people set themselves up for failure when they're in a negative state by setting impossible challenges and then berating themselves for not achieving them. Far better to give yourself a manageable challenge like simply walking briskly to the post office or dancing all the way through to the end of a favourite song. If you are prone to negative thoughts – beating yourself up in your head – break the cycle with vigorous exercise. Whenever a thought pops up, turn your attention to your breath or the feel of your feet meeting the earth, whatever works as a distraction. Regular exercise truly will make a difference to your mood, it's guaranteed. So make time for it in your daily life and beat the blues before they descend.

3. Take time out

If you feel like you're in a cycle of serving others – whether it's your kids, your partner, other family members or friends – take a break. Book it in the diary and stick to it. It might be a walk alone every few evenings, or an hour or two catching up with friends or reading in a café. Keep it as simple as you can so avoid long drives or obligations to meet up if what you really need is the chance to simply gaze out the window with your own thoughts. And don't, whatever you do, feel guilty for carving out some time alone. Coming back calmer, happier and with a renewed sense of purpose makes you a better mum/dad/partner/friend in the long run. If you seem to take on the bulk of the caring role in your relationship, it will do your partner a world of good to experience what you do, plus it will help to enhance the relationship between your partner and children. So even if it's bedtime and there's carnage in the house as you walk away, do so with a light heart knowing that your health and vitality are important to the functioning of the family as a whole.

4. Avoid mood-altering food and drink

This is a bit of a personal struggle for me. I'm the first to reach for the coffee and chocolate when I feel emotionally haywire, seeking solace in food. However, I have learnt from bitter experience that this route truly doesn't work. The high is short-lived and then the lows are even more crushing as the body fights to balance blood sugar and energy levels crash. Far better to make yourself something nourishing and comforting – a soup, stew or nutrient-rich juice – and tell yourself how each ingredient will help you feel better. Grounding foods such as sweet potatoes and carrots are great when you feel tense and anxious, cleansing, light foods like fresh salads, juices and colourful raw vegetables are uplifting when you feel yourself sinking into depression.

5. Step off the treadmill

One of the key reasons people experience depression and anxiety is a mounting sense of responsibility and stress. Our lives can feel jam-packed with must-do activities, phone calls we have to make, emails to reply to, visits to squeeze in. It's no wonder that sometimes we find ourselves churning through life with a numbness at our hearts. If you find yourself struggling to keep afloat, it might be time to downsize your life. This might be a major overhaul: cutting out friendships that don't bring you joy; eradicating social engagements and activities that no longer serve you; moving to eliminate travel stresses; clearing out your home; even changing jobs. Or it might be that simply getting away for a weekend or a week helps soothe frayed nerves: experiencing life in its simplest forms. A camping trip gathered with family under moonlight or starlight. Connecting with nature and building a fire together, eating simple food in beautiful surroundings. These kind of connective breaks help to break the cycle of obligation and stress that can build up. Another way is to give yourself a holiday at home by emailing friends, family and colleagues and letting them know you're taking some time out to focus on your family. Spend your time off doing as little as possible but enjoying the here and now.

6. Read something that makes your heart soar

Every so often, we discover a book that has a huge impact on our lives. It helps us see things differently, opens us up to the wonderful potential of each and every day, lifts our spirits and clarifies our thoughts. Make a point of collecting these books and arranging them in a feel-good library – a place on your bookshelves you can go to for support and solace. You might include quotes you've found on the internet, or pictures that really resonate. Perhaps your collection might feature inspirations for the life you want to lead: an interiors magazine if you dream of being an interior decorator or a photography book if capturing the world through the lens is your secret passion. The idea is to create a source of inspiration, joy and uplift that serves to connect you to your higher self; the self that will guide you through the darkness and to lighter days ahead.

7. Get outside and lie down on the earth

Although this might sound like a fanciful exercise when we're really trawling the doldrums of life, connecting to Source energy has a powerful rebalancing effect. When your heart is racing or your mind full of dark thoughts, being still in nature can have a hugely calming and clarifying effect. Enhance the experience by imagining you are held in a protective cradle, that the earth is there to

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support and nourish you and meet all your needs. Slow your breathing and allow your mind to follow the inhalations and exhalations. Surrender your body to the earth and feel its welcoming response to your surrender, holding and supporting you.

8. Release the tears

If we are experiencing mild rather than full-blown depression, crying can be a huge release. The feeling after a good cry might be described as cleansing; we might be puffy eyed and a bit exhausted but there is a sense that we have shed some of the emotion along with the tears. The science behind it is that crying activates both the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system is connected to our fight or flight response, while the parasympathetic nervous system, which is activated for longer when we cry, has a sedating, cathartic effect. So crying ultimately has a calming effect and can help us when emotions have built up and we haven't felt able to express them.

9. Help others

This doesn't really work if you already feel overwhelmed with responsibility but if you find that there is a space in your life and an ache to connect, volunteering with those in need might be just what's needed to change your whole attitude to life. When we get caught in a spiral of negativity and despair, it is often very difficult to see the bigger picture. Our problems feel insurmountable, our moods unchangeable. Helping others enables us to think about something else for a little while. It creates connections and strengthens our sense of self-worth. It might be that you find solace in visiting a neighbour in need, or perhaps a regular slot of volunteering in a charity shop, nursing home or animal shelter will help you gain perspective. Make sure you set clear boundaries and don't get sucked into negative or draining relationships or situations. Pick a use for your time that brings joy to both you and the recipient, and feel your mood soar as you help someone else.

10. Delegate

As a longer term solution to a feeling of overwhelm, delegating daily tasks frees you up to enjoy your life more. Set out a rota of activities, from taking the kids to school to cleaning the bathroom and get the whole family involved. If it creates a happier, calmer parent, kids should be only too happy to help contribute to the smooth running of the home. Don't be afraid to ask them to help out when it's needed – a family is a team and the idea is to work together so that one person is not burdened with an excessive load. Ask parents or friends if they can occasionally pick the kids up or look after them for the afternoon so you have some quiet time. Partners often don't know there's a problem until you reach breaking point and completely lose your rag, so avoid mounting tension by clearly asking them to do certain tasks and activities. A wall-chart can help too; most partners respond well to clearly stated tasks rather than battling through their partner's depression/anger/anxiety. Don't be afraid to delegate. People have a choice and can say no if they're not able to help, but creating a network of supportive friends and family means that when you're feeling better you can offer that same support to others. Often we expect people to know when we're feeling exhausted/unhappy, but it is far easier for everyone to state when we need help.

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