

# Dealing with depression



How to recognise the signs and the action you can take



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Patient Information Forum

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The sources used to create this publication are available on request.

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# About this guide

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We all feel sad from time to time. But as we get older, changes in our lives, for example, bereavement, illness or retirement, can make us more vulnerable to low moods or depression. This may mean we need a bit of extra support, but it's important to remember that poor mental health is not an inevitable part of ageing. If you're struggling to cope, help is available.

This guide explains what mental health is and what might make you vulnerable to depression. It also has guidance on where you can go for help, and things you can do to help yourself and stay well.

We spoke to older people about their experiences. Their quotes appear throughout.

In this guide you'll find references to our other publications. You can order them by calling **0800 319 6789** or visiting **[independentage.org/publications](https://independentage.org/publications)**.

# What is mental health?

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Your mental health describes your emotional wellbeing – how you think and feel, and how you deal with everyday stresses. It's just as important as your physical health, and like your physical health it can get better or worse over time. Your mental health can change with your situation and as you move into different stages of your life.

If you do experience low mood or depression, you're not alone. Depression affects around one in five older people. It's important to talk about how you feel and seek help. Treatments can be very effective, even if you've been feeling low for a long time, and there are lots of different options available.



## What is depression?

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Depression is a common mental health problem. It can be hard to know if you're experiencing depression because the symptoms may seem like exaggerated forms of everyday emotions. Depression varies from person to person, but no matter how it affects you, it is a real illness.

### What causes depression?

As you get older, life changes and losses can challenge good mental health, making you more vulnerable to low mood and depression. A period of depression might be caused by:

- ill health, including long-term health conditions
- bereavement
- loss of daily routine following retirement
- loneliness, isolation and loss of friendship networks
- loss of purpose
- moving house
- moving into a care home
- loss of income or money worries

- becoming a carer
- relationship breakdown
- loss of confidence or low self-esteem.

There could also be physical health causes, such as thyroid problems, certain vitamin deficiencies, side effects of medications (especially a combination of medications), or head injuries.

Sometimes, there may be no obvious cause at all.

Preparing for changes you know will happen, such as moving house, and thinking about how you will adjust to them, could make the transition easier.

**I am bipolar and I describe it like this: Depression is when you're waiting not to do things. Happiness is when you can't wait to do things.**

**When I was depressed, I stopped myself from doing things – I put obstacles in my way.**

## Depression and anxiety

Some symptoms of depression can overlap with anxiety, and there are some similar treatments. It is possible to experience both at the same time. See our guide **Managing anxiety** for more information on ways to cope with anxiety.

## Depression and dementia

Depression and dementia share some of the same symptoms, including memory problems or difficulty concentrating. You may worry you're suffering from dementia when you're actually depressed. The shared symptoms can also make it harder to diagnose depression if you already have dementia. If you're worried about either condition, talk to your GP or contact the Alzheimer's Society (**0333 150 3456**, [alzheimers.org.uk](http://alzheimers.org.uk)).





# How you might feel

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A low mood that doesn't lift may be a sign of depression. However, depression isn't just about low mood. You may experience the following:

## Thoughts and feelings

- loss of interest in life, including things you previously enjoyed
- feeling helpless or hopeless
- worrying or feeling anxious
- feeling irritable or angry
- difficulty concentrating
- problems with your memory
- feeling bored or restless
- being irritable with other people, or avoiding them
- being very tearful
- thoughts of self-harm or wanting to end your life
- feeling you've let yourself or others down
- feeling guilty.

## Physical symptoms and behaviour changes

Older people with depression usually have more physical symptoms. These can include:

- trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- over- and under-eating or loss of appetite
- having no energy and feeling tired for no reason
- loss of interest in sex
- dizziness and faintness
- constipation.

Some of these symptoms can also be caused by physical illnesses, which can make it harder to identify depression as the cause. If you have a long-term illness or multiple illnesses, this can make it especially difficult. Speak to your GP or healthcare professional if you have any troubling symptoms – see chapter 4.

### Good to know

The NHS website has a depression self-assessment tool, which might be useful:

[nhs.uk/conditions/clinical-depression](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/clinical-depression)

## When to seek help

Often, periods of low mood won't last very long. If there is an obvious cause, your mood may lift once the problem is resolved. However, you might want to consider support if:

- you have negative feelings that continue for more than two weeks or are getting worse
- the symptoms are interfering with your daily life
- you're having thoughts of self-harm or thinking that life is not worth living
- your family and friends are worried
- you've fixed a practical problem that may have triggered your depression, but still feel down.

If your feelings of depression are particularly strong, you should consider speaking to your GP – see chapter 4.

## If you feel you can't go on

If you start feeling life isn't worth living or that you want to harm yourself, seek help immediately. Contact your GP for an urgent appointment or call NHS **111**. Or call Samaritans on **116 123** for 24-hour confidential support.

## Where to go for help

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If you're experiencing depression, it can feel hard to ask for help. You might be nervous opening up to someone, but depression isn't something you have to go through alone. Support is available and getting the right treatment sooner rather than later can help you to start feeling better again.

### Find a good listener

Talking to friends, family or someone you trust about how you're feeling is a good first step. If you're going to speak to your GP, you might also find it helpful to have someone else with you.

Another option is to try a helpline for emotional or mental health support, such as:

- The Silver Line (0800 470 8090, [thesilverline.org.uk](https://thesilverline.org.uk))
- Samaritans (116 123, [samaritans.org](https://samaritans.org))
- Rethink Mental Illness (0300 5000 927, [rethink.org](https://rethink.org))
- Mind (0300 123 3393, [mind.org.uk](https://mind.org.uk)).

The first two helplines are free and available 24 hours a day.

## Talk to your doctor

If your low mood continues or you're struggling to cope, speak to your GP. They can assess your needs and suggest treatments, such as counselling, medication or steps you can take to help yourself. The appointment could be over the phone or face-to-face.

### Before the appointment

It's a good idea to write down everything you want to say to your GP, and check it off during the appointment. Our medical appointment planner can help with this. Find it in our **Living well with long-term health conditions** guide, or on our website ([independentage.org/preparing-for-medical-appointments](https://independentage.org/preparing-for-medical-appointments)).

Remember, you don't have to have physical symptoms to speak to your GP about your health.

### During the appointment

Your GP will ask you about how you're feeling and any other symptoms, and may make a diagnosis of depression. They may ask you to complete a written questionnaire as part of the assessment. If you want to, you can have a family member or friend with you for support.

## Treatment options

Your GP will then discuss appropriate treatment options with you. These could include:

- talking therapies – such as counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy through the NHS psychological therapies (IAPT) service. These services are free, but they may be short-term and there is likely to be a waiting list. You can also refer yourself ([nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-psychological-therapies-service](https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-psychological-therapies-service))
- medication – including different types of antidepressants. You should be told about how long you may need to take these for, and possible side effects. It's important to check that any new medication will work well with anything you're already taking
- self-help resources and activities – including support groups, books, online tools and exercise programmes
- a combination of these things.

**I felt awful but I didn't want to burden my friends or family with it, so I contacted the number my GP gave me and arranged an appointment with a therapist. I learnt lots of ways to deal with how I was feeling and what was happening to me. I could just say exactly what I felt without worrying, whereas you tend to put on a show for other people.**

## Find a private counselling service

You might want to do this if NHS waiting times are long, after you've finished a short course of NHS counselling, or for more choice. The cost can vary a lot, so it's worth looking around.

Your GP should be able to help you find a therapist, or the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) has a searchable directory (**01455 883300**, **[bacp.co.uk/search/therapists](http://bacp.co.uk/search/therapists)**). Make sure your therapist is accredited by a professional body, such as the BACP.

## Get support for specific problems

If you've been through a painful event or are worried about a specific problem, there may be a specialist organisation that can help you with practical and emotional support. For example:

- Relate for relationship counselling - there's usually a charge for counselling sessions (0300 100 1234, [relate.org.uk](http://relate.org.uk))
- Cruse Bereavement Care (0808 808 1677, [cruse.org.uk](http://cruse.org.uk))
- support groups for addiction and dependency, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (0800 917 7650, [alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](http://alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk))
- StepChange (0800 138 1111, [stepchange.org](http://stepchange.org)) or National Debtline (0808 808 4000, [nationaldebtline.org](http://nationaldebtline.org)) for debt advice
- Shelter for housing advice (0808 800 4444, [shelter.org.uk/get\\_advice](http://shelter.org.uk/get_advice)).

## Support during coronavirus (COVID-19)

It's especially important to take care of yourself during the pandemic and get help if you need it. If you're struggling to cope, consider trying to:



- talk to your GP – see page 11
- find out what practical support you can get – our coronavirus hub has more information on getting food and essentials, and changes to services ([independentage.org/covid-19](https://independentage.org/covid-19))
- make an extra effort to keep in touch with friends and family – see page 27
- use self-help tools – visit the Every Mind Matters website for ideas on caring for your mental health during the pandemic ([nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters](https://nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters)).

## Join a self-help group

These are run by a number of organisations, including:

- Mind ([0300 123 3393](tel:03001233393), [mind.org.uk/information-support/local-minds](https://mind.org.uk/information-support/local-minds))
- Carers UK ([0808 808 7777](tel:08088087777), [carersuk.org/local-support](https://carersuk.org/local-support) or [carersuk.org/forum](https://carersuk.org/forum)).

You can also ask your GP about local mental health support groups. Some self-help groups are running online during the pandemic.

## Ways to help yourself

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There are lots of things you can do to look after yourself while you're feeling low, whether or not you're receiving help elsewhere.



### Talk to others and ask for help

Don't accept low mood and depression as part of ageing – they're not. Make sure you talk to people you trust about how you're feeling and get the help you're entitled to through the NHS.

## Stay connected

Depression may make you want to withdraw from others, but feeling lonely or isolated can contribute to feeling depressed. Try to stay in touch with people, even if it feels like an effort at first. Catching up with people and pursuing your interests and hobbies will help you to feel more positive. You could also consider getting more social contact by signing up for regular calls or visits from a volunteer – see chapter 6. Our guide **If you're feeling lonely** has more ideas for staying connected.

## Look after your physical health

Try to eat healthily, and avoid drinking too much alcohol as this will affect your mood. Sleep patterns can change as we get older. If you're noticing more changes than usual, such as waking up frequently or taking longer to fall asleep, you may want to talk to your GP.

## Keep active

You might not feel in the mood for exercising, but it's a good idea to keep doing as much as you can. Research shows it can boost your mood and self-confidence, and it can also help you to sleep better. See chapter 6 for activities you could try.

## Stick to your medication

Make sure you follow your GP's advice on any medication you've been prescribed. If you want to reduce your dosage or come off your medication completely, talk to your GP first, even if you're feeling better. Coming off some medications, such as antidepressants, can cause withdrawal symptoms if you stop taking them too quickly.

### St John's wort

St John's wort is a popular herbal remedy for mild depression. If you're considering using it, speak to your GP first. It may not be a suitable treatment option for you and it can interact with some other medications, potentially causing health problems.

## Follow a self-help course

Ask your GP or counsellor for recommendations of self-help resources, including books or online services. You could also ask about guided self-help. This typically involves using self-help resources while having your progress reviewed by a healthcare professional.

The NHS website offers practical tools to help you with your mental health and wellbeing ([nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/)).

## Do things you enjoy

Let yourself do things you enjoy, even if it might feel hard at the beginning. Giving yourself the odd treat, such as going out for a meal or watching your favourite film, can help raise your spirits.

**I think about depression like a broken leg: it hurts, it takes time to heal, you need to be patient with yourself. There's no way you can just pull yourself together and dance on as if nothing has happened.**

## Take things a step at a time

Getting better from depression can take time, so take things slowly. It's normal to have better and worse days. It can be harder to make decisions, so try to avoid making big changes, such as deciding to move house, until you feel more like yourself.

## Joan, 78

"I used to feel so lonely I'd sit at home and cry. I felt depressed and had no one to help me. I was divorced, my children had moved away and I had never expected to be living on my own. I have grandchildren but none of my family live near me.

"When I was depressed, I struggled to sleep. I'd have panic attacks and I'd want to call someone in the middle of the night so they could sit with me, but I couldn't talk to anyone. Then I'd panic more and feel my heart racing. So many of us feel isolated and alone.

"I went to my doctor about anti-depressants, but I decided they weren't for me.

"I called Independent Age and they arranged for a volunteer visitor to come and see me once a week. When she arrived for the first time, we clicked immediately. She just made me feel at ease. I always feel so much happier after we've spoken.

"A volunteer from another charity told me about a local day centre but I didn't feel I could go on my own. I didn't have any confidence.

She said she'd come with me for the first three times and little by little my confidence came back.

"At the day centre I met people as lonely as me and I talked and ate with them. Everyone there is so lovely. We talk to each other and hear what other people are going through, and I find that helps me.

When other people are happy and laughing, I want to know how they do it, so I talk to them about what makes them happy. That helps me too.

"I would say to anyone who is feeling depressed to talk to other people. I find that's what has helped me. Any kind of talking therapy is the answer for so many of us. If I start to feel depressed now, I have people who I can call anytime and that helps me feel better."



Picture posed by model

## Staying well

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Even if you're feeling completely well again, it's good to boost your emotional resilience and improve your mental health in the long term. If you know your life is going to change soon – for example, if you're thinking of moving to a new area away from good friends – you could start planning for this and thinking about how you can adjust to it.

### Set yourself targets

Setting yourself some achievable goals can help you carry on doing things that will protect your mental health, make you feel good and give you a sense of satisfaction when you achieve them. Keep them realistic and build them up over time. They can be simple, specific things like, "I will go for a walk today" or "I will ring my friend this week". Don't worry if you don't always stick to your plans. If you can, try to identify what stopped you and what you could do differently next time.



## Exercise

Staying active has a huge number of benefits. It can give you more energy, boost your mood by releasing feel-good chemicals in the brain, help you to sleep and eat properly, and generally improve your physical health. Find an activity that works for you, for example:

- gardening or housework
- walking or cycling – the NHS recommends two and a half hours a week of this level of activity for over-65s who are generally fit and healthy
- strength, flexibility and balance exercises – the NHS website has details of good ones for older people, including chair-based exercises ([nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/physical-activity-guidelines-older-adults](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/physical-activity-guidelines-older-adults))
- swimming or water aerobics
- yoga or tai chi
- dancing.

You should talk to your GP before starting a new exercise routine, especially if you're not used to regular exercise. Your GP might be able to refer you for a formal exercise programme.

## Eat a balanced diet

Like exercise, eating well can have a positive effect on how we feel. Aim for low-sugar foods and drinks, and avoid drinking too much alcohol. Try to eat regular meals and a balanced diet that includes:

- starchy foods, such as bread, rice, pasta or potatoes – go for wholegrain or brown options whenever you can, because they help keep you full for longer
- at least five portions of fruit and veg a day
- enough protein, for example, beans, pulses, fish, eggs or meat – try to have a little bit with every meal
- plenty of water – even slight dehydration can affect your mood, so aim for 6-8 glasses of water a day. Tea, coffee and juice also count but watch out for the caffeine or sugar content.

NHS Eat well ([nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well)) has more information about eating a balanced diet.

## Increase your sense of purpose

Volunteering is a great way to support a good cause, boost your self-esteem and meet new people. It can give you a sense of purpose and help you to feel less isolated. There are lots of different opportunities around, so find something to suit your skills and interests.

- Charities often need volunteers of all ages. For example, Independent Age looks for volunteers to make regular friendship phone calls or visits to older people (020 7605 4255, [independentage.org/get-involved](https://independentage.org/get-involved)).
- The Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme helps older people find opportunities to use their skills and experience in the community (020 3780 5870, [volunteeringmatters.org.uk/pillars/older-people](https://volunteeringmatters.org.uk/pillars/older-people)).
- [Do-it.org](https://do-it.org) lets you search for volunteering opportunities in your area, so it's a good place to start if you're online.

## Sign up for regular calls, visits or group activities

If you're feeling lonely, you could think about asking for an Independent Age volunteer to visit or phone you on a regular basis. Contact Independent Age for more information (**0800 319 6789, [independentage.org/get-support](https://independentage.org/get-support)**). The Royal Voluntary Service also offers befriending services (**0330 555 0310, [royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk](https://royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk)**).

Some groups organise regular social activities for older people. For example, Re-engage arranges monthly afternoon tea parties and reading groups (**0800 716 543, [reengage.org.uk](https://reengage.org.uk)**). Groups may be meeting online or over the phone during the coronavirus pandemic.

**We hit it off straight away. It was marvellous. It's made life much more pleasant, much nicer. I look forward to her coming.**

## Seek companionship

Staying in touch with people can help you feel happier and help keep things in perspective. If you can't meet in person, try a phone call, email or text message. If you're online, you could keep in touch through a video call by using free services such as Skype, or you could use Facebook or WhatsApp to send messages to friends and find people you've lost touch with.

Pets can also be excellent companions, so you could consider getting a dog or cat. Many animal rehoming charities have dog walking programmes if you can't commit to a pet, or want to spend some time with one before getting your own. You can sign up to look after or walk someone else's dog through organisations such as The Cinnamon Trust (01736 757 900, [www.cinnamon.org.uk](http://www.cinnamon.org.uk)) or Borrow My Doggy (020 3826 8628, [borrowmydoggy.com](http://borrowmydoggy.com)). There's a small fee to sign up with the latter.

## Keep your mind active

Read a book or newspaper, do crosswords or sudoku puzzles, play chess or card games, or learn a new skill. You could enrol on an adult learning course, a computer course at a local library, or take up a new sport or hobby. The University of the Third Age has many local branches which offer a wide range of free or low-cost clubs and classes for older people ([020 8466 6139](tel:02084666139), [u3a.org.uk](http://u3a.org.uk)).



## Learn to be alone

Solitude can be just as important as staying connected. Being alone doesn't have to mean feeling lonely, so try to turn it into a rewarding experience.

You could use some of your time alone to concentrate on yourself and make time for your own interests and the things you enjoy. You could pick up a new hobby or return to an old one, such as painting, building a collection or learning a musical instrument.

You could also use it to practise mindfulness ([mind.org.uk/mindfulness](https://www.mind.org.uk/mindfulness)). This is a form of meditation where you focus on the present moment. For instance, you might focus on your breathing. It can be a useful tool to help manage your thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness might be recommended to you if you've had three or more periods of depression, but isn't recommended if you suffer from social anxiety. Ask your GP or therapist for advice before you try it alone.

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## How to help someone you're worried about

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If you're worried about the mental health of a friend or relative, or think they may be depressed, there are things you can do to help them.

### Encourage them to seek help

Reassure them that depression and low mood are common and can be treated successfully. You could also offer to be with them if they speak to their GP, as they may find it daunting to talk about their emotions when they're feeling vulnerable.

**If you think they're in immediate danger of harming themselves, call 999.**

### What you can do to help

- Listen to what they say, without judging them. It can be hard to open up about difficult emotions, so let them know it's okay to talk. Don't force them to talk if they don't want to – just make it clear you'll be there when they need you.



- Don't dismiss their problems and resist telling them to 'cheer up'. Depression is an illness, so it's not as simple as this.
- Reassure them that how they're feeling is not their fault and it's treatable. Depression often makes people feel guilty and that they're letting others down, so they may be blaming themselves.
- Offer practical help if they're struggling to cope with daily tasks. For example, if they aren't eating properly, you could make them a meal.
- Keep in touch with them. Depression can increase isolation as people who are depressed often avoid others' company.
- Be patient and kind. It might take time for them to get help or start feeling better.

## Look after yourself

This may be a stressful situation for you as well as them. Remember to look after your mental health and wellbeing too. If you're struggling, you could ask your GP for help and advice, or call helplines such as Samaritans (**116 123, [samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org)**) or Mind (**0300 123 3393, [mind.org.uk](https://www.mind.org.uk)**).

# You may be interested in...



## If you're feeling lonely

Ways to overcome loneliness.



## Coping with bereavement

How you might feel after a death, and where you can find support.



## Living well with long-term health conditions

How to manage your condition and get the support you need.

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The information in this guide applies to England only.

If you're in Wales, contact Age Cymru  
(0800 022 3444, [ageuk.org.uk/cymru](https://ageuk.org.uk/cymru))  
for information and advice.

In Scotland, contact Age Scotland  
(0800 12 44 222, [ageuk.org.uk/scotland](https://ageuk.org.uk/scotland))

In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI  
(0808 808 7575, [ageuk.org.uk/northern-ireland](https://ageuk.org.uk/northern-ireland))

We want the UK to be the best place to grow older and we have ambitious targets to increase the number of older people we help and the difference we make. We receive no state funding and rely on income from individuals, trusts and other sources to continue providing our services to hundreds of thousands of older people in need.

Visit [independentage.org](https://independentage.org) to make a secure online donation and find out about other ways to support us. Alternatively, you can call us on 020 7605 4223 or email [supporters@independentage.org](mailto:supporters@independentage.org)



## About Independent Age

Whatever happens as we get older, we all want to remain independent and live life on our own terms. That's why, as well as offering regular friendly contact and a strong campaigning voice, Independent Age can provide you and your family with clear, free and impartial advice on the issues that matter: care and support, money and benefits, health and mobility.

A charity founded over 150 years ago, we're independent so you can be.

For more information, visit our website **[independentage.org](http://independentage.org)**

Call us for information or to arrange free, impartial advice from an adviser. Lines are open 8.30am – 6.30pm Monday to Friday. Freephone **0800 319 6789** or email **[advice@independentage.org](mailto:advice@independentage.org)**



**Independent  
Age**

**Independent Age**  
18 Avonmore Road  
London  
W14 8RR

T 020 7605 4200  
E [charity@independentage.org](mailto:charity@independentage.org)  
[www.independentage.org](http://www.independentage.org)  
**Helpline 0800 319 6789**

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