



**Independent  
Age**



# Dealing with depression

**How to recognise the signs  
and find support**



## Thank you

We would like to thank those who shared their experiences as this guide was being developed, and those who reviewed it for us. Our special thanks go to Mind for their expert knowledge during the review.

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Author: Independent Age

Publisher: Independent Age

Design: Mark Errington

Photography: Leanne Benson p4, 8, 9, 14, 23, 27, 33, 35, 37;

Centre for Ageing Better p3, 40; Lee Townsend cover, p5, 20, 21

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Date of publication: August 2022

Next review date: March 2024

We spoke to older people about their experiences. Their quotes appear throughout. We have changed the names of some of the interviewees who wished to be anonymous. Some of the images seen throughout this guide are posed by friends of Independent Age.

The PIF TICK is the UK-wide Quality Mark for Health Information.

# About this guide

We all feel sad from time to time. But as we get older, changes in our lives, such as 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. Depression has many different causes and can affect us at different times in our lives. If you're struggling to cope, help is available.

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

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



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## 1. What is mental health?

Your mental health describes your emotional wellbeing – how you think, feel and react. It's just as important as your physical health and, like your physical health, it can get better or worse over time.

# 1. What is mental health?

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 1 in 5 older people. It's important to talk about how you feel and seek help.

It can feel difficult to reach out, but this can be the first step to feeling better. Support and treatment can be very effective, even if you've been feeling low for a long time, and there are lots of different options available.





## 2. What is depression?

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.

## 2. What is depression?

Depression varies from person to person. No matter how it affects you, it's always okay to ask for support, even if you're not sure whether you're experiencing depression.

### What causes depression?

There are many different factors that can contribute to depression and it can affect us at any age. But you may be more likely to experience some of these factors as you get older and go through life changes and losses. These include:

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

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. You may have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sometimes, there may be no obvious cause at all.

## Depression and anxiety

Some symptoms of depression can overlap with anxiety, and there are some similar treatments. It's possible to experience both at the same time.



See our guide **Managing anxiety** for more information on ways to cope with anxiety.

“ 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.

## 2. What is depression?

### 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)) or Alzheimer Scotland (**0808 808 3000**, [alzscot.org](http://alzscot.org)).





### 3. How you might feel

A low mood that affects your everyday life and lasts a long time may be a sign of depression. However, depression isn't just about low mood.

## 3. How you might feel

If you're affected by depression, 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)**.

## 3. How you might feel

### When to seek help

Often, periods of low mood won't last very long. If there's an obvious cause, your mood may lift once the problem is resolved. But it's okay to seek help at any time, whether you've just started feeling low or you've been finding things difficult for some time.

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
- your family and friends are worried
- you've fixed a practical problem that may have triggered your depression, but still feel down
- you're having thoughts of self-harm or thinking that life is not worth living.

To find out about seeking help, 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.



If your life is at risk, call **999** and ask for an ambulance.

If you don't want to call 999:

- contact your GP for an urgent appointment
- call NHS **111**
- call Samaritans on **116 123** for 24-hour confidential support.
- Mind has more information about how to get help in a crisis (**0300 123 3393**, [mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/crisis-services/getting-help-in-a-crisis](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/crisis-services/getting-help-in-a-crisis)).

“ I got depressed when COVID started. I take antidepressants now. They really settled me down.



## 4. Where to go for help

If you're experiencing depression, it can feel hard to ask for help. You might be nervous about 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 find it helpful to have someone else with you.

You could also try a helpline for emotional or mental health advice and support, such as:

- The Silver Line (**0800 470 8090**, **thesilverline.org.uk**)
- Samaritans (**116 123**, **samaritans.org**)
- Rethink Mental Illness (**0808 801 0525**, **rethink.org**)
- Mind (**0300 123 3393**, **mind.org.uk**)
- Breathing Space – Scotland (**0800 838 587**, **breathingspace.scot**)
- C.A.L.L. – Wales (**0800 132 737**, **callhelpline.org.uk**).

## 4. Where to go for help

### Talk to your doctor

Your GP 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, so you don't forget during the appointment.



Our medical appointment planner can help with this. Find it in our **Living well with long-term health conditions** guide, or at [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.

## Treatment options

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

- talking therapies – such as counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) through the NHS – which involve speaking to a trained professional about your thoughts, feelings and experiences. These services are free, but they may be short term and there is likely to be a waiting list. In England, 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. Your GP should tell you how long you may need to take these for, and about 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.

## 4. Where to go for help

“ I felt awful but I didn't want to burden my friends or family, so I 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 say exactly what I felt without worrying.

### Find a private counselling service

You might want to do this if NHS waiting times are long, or after you've finished a short course of NHS counselling, or for more choice. This might not be an option for everyone as it can be expensive. The cost can vary a lot, so it's worth looking around.

Your GP should be able to help you find a therapist. Or contact:

- the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) (**01455 883300**, [bacp.co.uk/search/therapists](http://bacp.co.uk/search/therapists))
- COSCA for services in Scotland (**01786 475140**, [cosca.org.uk/our-services/find-counsellor/find-a-counsellor](http://cosca.org.uk/our-services/find-counsellor/find-a-counsellor)).

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**)
- Cruse Bereavement Care (**0808 808 1677**, **cruse.org.uk**) or Cruse Scotland (**0808 802 6161**, **crusescotland.org.uk**)
- support groups for addiction and dependency, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (**0800 917 7650**, **alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk**) or Narcotics Anonymous (**0300 999 1212**, **ukna.org**)
- StepChange (**0800 138 1111**, **stepchange.org**) or National Debtline (**0808 808 4000**, **nationaldebtline.org**) for debt advice
- Mental Health and Money Advice online service (**mentalhealthandmoneyadvice.org**)
- Shelter for housing advice (**0808 800 4444**, **shelter.org.uk/get\_advice**).

## 4. Where to go for help

### Find support in your community

Local organisations may offer counselling or support groups, where people with shared experiences help each other, including:

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

You can also ask your GP about local mental health organisations.





## 5. Ways to help yourself

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

## 5. Ways to help yourself

Different things work for different people, so be kind to yourself if you try one of these and it doesn't work.

### Talk to others and ask for help

Low mood and depression are not an inevitable part of ageing and you deserve support. Try to talk to people you trust about how you're feeling and make sure you 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 can help you to feel more positive.



Read our guide **If you're feeling lonely** for more ideas to help you stay connected.

## Look after your physical health

Try to eat healthily and avoid drinking too much alcohol because this can 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. Mind has some useful information about antidepressants ([mind.org.uk/information-support/drugs-and-treatments/antidepressants/about-antidepressants](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/drugs-and-treatments/antidepressants/about-antidepressants)).

## Herbal remedies

Some people take herbal remedies, such as St John's wort, to try to help with their mental health.

If you're considering using a herbal remedy, it's important to speak to your GP first. They may not be a suitable treatment option for you. They 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 websites offer practical tools to help you with your mental health and wellbeing:

- [nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help)
- [nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health/depression#depression-self-help-guide](https://nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health/depression#depression-self-help-guide)
- [nhs.wales.silvercloudhealth.com/onboard/nhs.wales](https://nhs.wales.silvercloudhealth.com/onboard/nhs.wales)

## 5. Ways to help yourself

### 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.

### Take things a step at a time

Feeling better 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.

“ 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.



## 6. Staying well

Even if you're feeling well again, it's good to look after yourself and take small steps to improve your mental health in the long term.

## 6. Staying well

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 or you're retiring – you could start planning for this and thinking about how you can adjust to it. This could make the transition easier.

### 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.

Goals 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 could help you achieve the target next time.

**“ If I can't concentrate, I put that great big novel aside and read a short story or article instead. In other words, break things down into 'bite size' or more manageable pieces.**

## 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 well, and generally improve your physical health.

It can be difficult to do this when you're not feeling well. But taking small steps to be more active can make a difference. Find an activity that works for you, for example:

- gardening or housework
- walking or cycling
- 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.

## 6. Staying well

### 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 vegetables 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.



#### Good to know

Our webpage Eating well in later life has more information about eating a balanced diet ([independentage.org/get-advice/wellbeing/living-well/eating-well](https://independentage.org/get-advice/wellbeing/living-well/eating-well)).

You could also ask your GP for advice.

## Try volunteering

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 has a number of ways you can get involved (**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**, **[volunteermatters.org.uk/pillars/older-people](https://volunteermatters.org.uk/pillars/older-people)**).
- **Doit.life/volunteer** lets you search for volunteering opportunities in your area, so it's a good place to start if you're online.

## 6. Staying well

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

If you're feeling lonely, you could consider speaking to us about our community or telephone volunteers. They may be able to help you find new ways to get out and about.



Contact Independent Age for more information (**0800 319 6789**, **[independentage.org/get-support](https://independentage.org/get-support)**).

The Royal Voluntary Service also offers a Community Companions service (**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)**).



“ We hit it off straightaway. It was marvellous. It’s made life much more pleasant, much nicer. I look forward to her coming.

## 6. Staying well

### Seek companionship

Staying in touch with people can help you feel happier and less isolated. 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.

### Connect with nature

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**, [cinnamon.org.uk](http://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.

Being around animals or doing activities outdoors can really help your health and wellbeing. Mind has some suggestions for ways you can connect with nature.



Visit [mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/nature-and-mental-health/ideas-to-try-in-nature](https://mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/nature-and-mental-health/ideas-to-try-in-nature) or contact your local Mind (**0300 123 3393**, [mind.org.uk/information-support/local-minds](https://mind.org.uk/information-support/local-minds)).



## 6. Staying well

### 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**, **u3a.org.uk**).

### Make time for yourself

It can be difficult to know how to cope if we find ourselves spending more time alone than we used to. As well as trying to make new connections, you could use this time to focus on yourself and your own interests.

You could pick up a new hobby or return to an old one, such as painting, building a collection or learning a musical instrument.



## 7. How to help someone you're worried about

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

## 7. How to help someone you're worried about

### Support them to seek help

You can't force someone to seek help, but you can reassure them that depression and low mood are common and that there is help out there.

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.
- Try not to dismiss their feelings or put pressure on them to 'cheer up'. It's not as simple as this.

- Reassure them that how they're feeling is not their fault. Depression often makes people feel guilty and that they're letting others down.
- Offer practical help if they're struggling to cope with daily tasks.
- Keep in touch. Depression can increase isolation because people who are depressed often avoid 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. Remember to look after your mental health 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)**).



## Joan's story

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 antidepressants, but I decided they weren't for me.

A volunteer 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 grew.

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.

“ 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.

## About Independent Age

At Independent Age, we want more people in the UK to live a happy, connected and purposeful later life. That's why we support people aged over 65 to get involved in things they enjoy. We also campaign and give advice on the issues that matter most: health and care, money and housing.

For information or advice – we can arrange a free, impartial chat with an adviser – call us on freephone **0800 319 6789** (Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 6.30pm) or email us at **[advice@independentage.org](mailto:advice@independentage.org)**.

You can also support this work by volunteering with us, joining our campaigns to improve life for older people experiencing hardship, donating to us or remembering us in your will.

For more information, visit **[independentage.org](https://independentage.org)** or call us on **0800 319 6789**.



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