

Defeating Depression Naturally

Approaches to lift your spirits without using prescription medication

More than 20 million Americans suffer from depression in any given year, and antidepressants are now the most commonly prescribed medications in the country. Instead of pharmaceuticals, I suggest that people with mild to moderate depression try natural therapies, such as those described in the new book *Unstuck: Your Guide to the Seven-Stage Journey Out of Depression* by James S. Gordon, MD (Pennington Press, 2008). He's the founder and director of The Center for Mind-Body Medicine (cmbm.org) in Washington, DC. Here are the highlights of his approach.

Depression isn't a disease. According to Dr. Gordon, "We've created this idea that [depression] is a specific disease with a specific biochemical error, and it's not true. Depression comes when our lives aren't working." He believes depression can be an opportunity to address underlying problems. Antidepressant drugs may narrow your range of feelings and don't get at core issues, but many people aren't offered other choices. Dr. Gordon's perspective provides more options, and I find it empowering. "We have this incredible ability for self-healing," he says. "[Dealing] with the issues that are causing your depression offers the promise of profound changes in your life, as well as symptom relief."

There are stages of depression.

Like Dr. Gordon, I believe depression is a process that can allow you to learn about yourself and become stronger. He identifies seven stages along this journey. The first is "the call," or realization that something is wrong and that you need to change. The second, "meeting guides on the path," directs you to choose helpers and develop your own wisdom. Then you "surrender to change," letting go of what made you get "stuck" and moving on. Next, you "deal with demons," such as fear or pride, and find meaning, purpose, and

direction. The "dark night of the soul" involves moving through despair to allow life-giving freedom to emerge. "Spirituality: the blessing" is experiencing the transformative connection to something greater than yourself. Finally comes "the return" to a joyful life, lived deeply and consciously, in light of all that you have learned during the journey.

Start with simple measures. Breath work can be a quick way to alter your mood, and the benefits grow with practice. Dr. Gordon suggests a breathing exercise he calls "Soft Belly." Sit quietly and breathe slowly and deeply in through

"Aerobic exercise is the most effective treatment that I know for mild to moderate depression."

your nose and out through your mouth, keeping your belly soft and letting it expand and contract with your breath. Repeat a phrase to keep your mind focused, if necessary. Do Soft Belly for five to 10 minutes twice a day at first, then longer or more frequently as needed.

Next, identify things you enjoy, or "sweet spots," you can do daily, such as talking with a trusted friend, practicing yoga, walking in nature, or listening to

music. Doing something enjoyable every day helps to counteract feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

Regular aerobic exercise is also key. Numerous studies have found exercise helps depression, likely by increasing levels of depleted neurotransmitters and by releasing "feel good" chemicals called endorphins. Aim for 30 minutes of aerobic exercise at least three times a week.

Personalize your regimen. Many other natural therapies can also help relieve depression. "If one isn't appealing, just find one you do like," says Dr. Gordon. Besides regular exercise, I often recommend fish oil supplements (2 to 3 grams daily) and some form of psychotherapy, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy. SAM-e is a quick-acting antidepressant supplement; it's also expensive. To experiment with it, take 400 mg twice daily on an empty stomach. Laughter yoga is another worthwhile approach that is also fun; to learn more, visit laughteryoga.org.

Other therapies that Dr. Gordon describes in his book include dietary measures, guided imagery, self-expression (through words, drawings, and movement), acupuncture, herbal remedies, and spiritual practices. The volume also includes an extensive list of resources.

For people who are suffering from severe depression, I recommend seeing a mental health professional.

Do Antidepressants Work?

In January, the *New England Journal of Medicine* reported that drug companies had not published many negative studies of antidepressants, skewing data about their effectiveness. When all of the trials are considered, researchers found that the drugs only slightly outperform placebos. I'm not surprised, and I predict we'll see more evidence these medications work no better than placebos. For severe depression, antidepressants are one option, but even then, I think it's best to use them for a limited time. If you're currently taking antidepressants, it's important not to stop cold turkey. Create a natural treatment program, such as Dr. Gordon's, and work with your doctor to lower the dose gradually to limit discontinuation reactions.