

# Dealing with depression

How to recognise the signs  
and the action you can take



## Thank you

Independent Age would like to thank those who shared their experiences as this guide was being developed, and those who reviewed the information for us.

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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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Our mental health is just as important as our physical health. As we get older, changes in our lives, such as bereavement, illness or retirement, can make us more vulnerable to depression and anxiety. This can mean we need a bit of extra support, but it's important to remember that poor mental health is not always part of ageing. Everyone feels sad from time to time, but 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 how you 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 four 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 involves more exaggerated forms of everyday emotions, so it can be hard to know if you're experiencing depression. The symptoms of depression vary from person to person, but no matter how it affects you, it is a real illness. Worrying and feeling sad are normal parts of life, but if these feelings don't go away, they could be a sign of depression.

## What does depression feel like?

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; 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 if you have any troubling symptoms - see chapter 4.

**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 dementia

Depression and dementia share some of the same symptoms, including memory problems, increased anxiety or difficulty concentrating, so you may worry you're suffering from dementia when you're actually depressed. If you are concerned about your memory talk to your GP and they can look at whether you have either condition.

The shared symptoms can also make it harder to diagnose depression if you already have dementia.

If you think you or someone with dementia who you care for may be depressed, speak to a GP and contact the Alzheimer's Society for further help and advice (**0300 222 1122**, **[alzheimers.org.uk](http://alzheimers.org.uk)**).

# 3 What can affect our mental health?

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As you get older, life changes and losses can challenge good mental health, making you more vulnerable to low mood and depression. For example:

- ill health, including long-term health conditions
- bereavement
- loss of daily routine following retirement
- redundancy
- loneliness, isolation and loss of friendship networks
- loss of independence
- 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.

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



## When to consider seeing a doctor

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Often, periods of low mood won't last very long. For example, if there is an obvious cause, your mood may lift once the problem is resolved. If your feelings of depression are particularly strong or last for more than two weeks, you might want to consider seeing your GP. For example:

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

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

- talking therapies, such as counselling or Cognitive Behaviour Therapy through the NHS (sometimes called an Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) service). These services are free, but they may be short-term and there is likely to be a waiting list
- 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.

You may want to take a family member or friend with you for support. It's a good idea to write down everything that you want to say to your GP, and check it off at the appointment. You could use our medical appointment planner, which is in our guide **Living well with long-term health conditions** and on our website ([independentage.org/preparing-for-medical-appointments](https://independentage.org/preparing-for-medical-appointments)).

## Good to know

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

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

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

If you're having thoughts of suicide or harming yourself, you should seek help immediately.

See your GP or call **NHS 111**, or call Samaritans (**116 123**).

**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.**

# Where to go for help

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## Find a good listener

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

For emotional support, you could try one of these helplines. Both are available 24 hours a day, every day:

- The Silver Line (0800 4 70 80 90) – a dedicated helpline for older people
- Samaritans (116 123), to talk about anything that's troubling you.

You could also call a mental health helpline, such as:

- Rethink Mental Illness (0300 5000 927)
- Mind (0300 123 3393).

## Talk to your GP

If your low mood continues or you're struggling to cope, speak to your GP. They will be able to assess your needs and find you an appropriate treatment, such as counselling, therapy or medication. They could also recommend measures you can take to help yourself, including support groups and social activities.

See chapter 4 for more information.

**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 waiting times are



long for counselling through the NHS, after you've finished a short course of NHS counselling sessions, 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](tel:01455883300), [bacp.co.uk/search/therapists](https://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](tel:03001001234), [relate.org.uk](https://relate.org.uk))
- Cruse Bereavement Care ([0808 808 1677](tel:08088081677), [cruse.org.uk](https://cruse.org.uk))
- support groups for addiction and dependency, such as Alcoholics Anonymous ([0800 917 7650](tel:08009177650), [alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](https://alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk))
- StepChange ([0800 138 1111](tel:08001381111), [stepchange.org](https://stepchange.org))

or National Debtline ([0808 808 4000](tel:08088084000), [nationaldebtline.org](https://nationaldebtline.org)) for debt advice

- Shelter for housing advice ([0808 800 4444](tel:08088004444), [shelter.org.uk/get\\_advice](https://shelter.org.uk/get_advice)).

**Don't be afraid to ask or pick up the phone – the help is there.**

Paul, support volunteer for a bereavement organisation

## 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)) and Carers UK ([0808 808 7777](tel:08088087777), [carersuk.org/local-support](https://carersuk.org/local-support) or [carersuk.org/forum](https://carersuk.org/forum)).

## If you feel you can't go on

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

# 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.

## 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, but if you're noticing more changes than usual, such as waking up frequently or taking longer to fall asleep, then you may want to talk to your GP.

## Stay 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.

## 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.

## Keep connected

Loneliness and isolation can contribute to anxiety and depression, so 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 page 24. Our guide **If you're feeling lonely** has more ideas for staying connected. For information about local mental health support groups, speak to your GP or call Mind (0300 123 3393).

## Take things a step at a time

It can be hard to make decisions if you're depressed, so where possible avoid making big decisions, such as deciding to move house, until you feel more like yourself.

## 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.

Moodzone, on the NHS website, offers practical information and interactive tools to help you cope with depression, stress and anxiety ([nhs.uk/moodzone](https://www.nhs.uk/moodzone)).

## Look after yourself

Allow yourself to do things you enjoy. Raise your spirits by giving yourself the odd treat, such as going out for a meal or to see a film.

## St John's wort

You may have heard about St John's wort, a popular herbal remedy for mild depression. If you're considering this, don't use it until you've spoken to your GP. It may not be the most suitable treatment option for you and it can interact with a number of other medications, potentially causing health problems.

## Kwame's story

One of our Helpline advisers, Anna, says, "We get a lot of calls from older people struggling with big changes or lots of problems at once. They don't always reveal how they're feeling immediately because they don't consider it part of the problem. People don't always want to ask for help if it's not about something practical, but mental health is very important and we can suggest sources of support.

"A recent caller, Kwame, was a full-time carer for his wife, who is living with dementia. Every day, he helped her get washed and dressed, did all the cooking and cleaning and made sure she took her medication on time. His wife's dementia diagnosis and his caring responsibilities had left Kwame feeling lonely and isolated. Friends had stopped visiting, and it was difficult for him to leave the house. He was feeling stressed and depressed but didn't want to tell anyone.

"I encouraged Kwame to get a care needs assessment for his wife and a carer's assessment for himself from the local council.

“They now have carers visiting to help them, which gives him a chance to go out to see friends or run errands.

“We also discussed where he could look for emotional support. Following our conversation,

Kwame went to see his GP who diagnosed him with mild depression. The GP discussed medication with him and referred him for a short course of counselling. The GP also suggested he attend the local carers’ support group – he went along to this, and it’s helped him to feel much less isolated as he can talk to others in a similar situation. He’s also talked to his son about how he’s been feeling and is now getting more support and visits from his family.”



# Staying well

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Even if you're feeling completely well again, it's a good idea to think about how you can 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 will cope with it.

## Set yourself targets

Setting yourself some achievable goals can help make sure that you keep 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 sticking to your plans 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 the 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.

## Change your eating habits

Like exercise, eating sensibly can have a positive effect on how we feel. Avoid high-sugar foods and drinks and too much alcohol, and try to eat a balanced diet to get your recommended five portions of fruit or veg a day. Some foods may even help to reduce depression, including those high in omega-3, such as oily fish (tuna, mackerel, sardines, salmon) or walnuts.

## 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](tel:02076054255), [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)).
- [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 you or phone you on a regular basis. You could also volunteer yourself.

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 (0845 608 0122, [royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk](https://royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk)).

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

Charlie talking about his Independent Age volunteer, Glynis

Some groups organise regular social activities for older people. For example, Contact the Elderly arranges monthly afternoon tea parties for people aged 75 and over ([0800 716 543](tel:0800716543), [contact-the-elderly.org.uk](http://contact-the-elderly.org.uk)).

## Seek companionship

Staying in touch with people can help you feel happier and help keep things in perspective. There are plenty of ways to do this these days. If you can't meet people in person, try a phone call, email or text message. If you're online, there are also some useful free ways to keep in touch.

For example, Skype is free if you make a call between two computers, or you could use Facebook 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 of the animal rehoming charities have dog walking programmes if you can't commit to a pet, or want to spend some time with a dog 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](tel:01736757900), [www.cinnamon.org.uk](http://www.cinnamon.org.uk)) or Borrow My Doggy ([020 3826 8628](tel:02038268628), [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 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](http://mind.org.uk/mindfulness)). This is a form of meditation, where you focus your mind on the present moment. For instance, you might focus on your breathing. It is a useful tool to help manage your thoughts and feelings.

## 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, try to encourage them to get help from their GP. Reassure them that depression and low mood are common and can be treated successfully. You could also offer to go to the GP with them, as they may find it daunting to talk about their emotions when they're feeling vulnerable.
- Listen to what they have to say, being supportive and non-judgemental. They may need a lot of reassurance, so be patient and kind. Don't force them to talk if they don't want to – just make it clear you're there when they need you.
- Don't be dismissive of their problems and resist telling them to 'cheer up'. It's not as simple as this. Remember that depression is an illness.
- If you think they're in immediate danger of harming themselves, call 999.





- Don't blame them for their behaviour. Depression often makes people feel guilty and that they're letting others down, so they may already be blaming themselves. Reassure them that this is a treatable illness and not their fault.
- If they are struggling to cope with daily tasks, offer practical assistance. For example, if they aren't eating properly, you could try making them a meal.
- Keep in touch with them. Depression can increase isolation as people who are depressed often avoid others' company.
- Look after yourself. This may be a stressful situation for you as well as them. If you're struggling, you could ask your GP for help and advice.

# 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 and 9am–1pm Saturday. Freephone **0800 319 6789** or email **[advice@independentage.org](mailto:advice@independentage.org)**



advice and support for older age

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