

# Maintaining Mental Health and Tips for Dealing with Depression

Staying Healthy During COVID-19



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# A little about me....

- Retired in 2016 from a career in environmental sustainability for city, county, and state government.
- 25-year survivor of periodic bouts of depression.

**Certified Peer Support Worker:** for people in recovery (from mental illness and/or addictions) who work or volunteer in the behavioral health sector.

- **The Life Link Board Member:** a 32-year non-profit providing homeless, mental health, substance use disorder, and victims of human trafficking services to our most disadvantaged.
- **Member:** Santa Fe County Behavioral Health Management Team
- **Volunteer:** “Breaking the Silence” - taking mental health education to middle and high schools.

# Before We Get Started....

Modified from my *A Survivor's Guide to Depression* for those who deal with depression and those who care for them.

- Even if you don't deal with depression, you may find these tips helpful in maintaining positive mental health.

If you feel you are or may be dealing with a mental illness, like depression, please seek help from a mental health professional.

“Take What Works for You and Leave the Rest” - my mantra in life!

Alcoholism, Addictions, and Even Moderate Usage - not addressed

- Recognize they may compromise your mental health.

Stay COVID Compliant! - social distancing. Do what you're comfortable doing. Immune-compromised: extra precautions.

# The Foundation for Positive Mental Health: Establishing and Maintaining “Connection”

- Connection with Yourself
- Connection with Others
- Connection with Nature
- Spiritual or Religious Connection

# Staying Connected to Yourself - Huh?

- Being at peace with and loving and liking who you are.
- Embrace that you are a unique individual and are worthy just the way you are - of love, of happiness.
- You have your own suite of qualities, perspectives, abilities... that nobody else has quite the way you do.
- Treat yourself as you would your best friend. Often we're the hardest on ourselves. Those internal "I'm not worthy" voices. Would you be saying those things to your best friend?
- Stuart Smalley on SNL - "You're good enough. You're smart enough...." - Kinda corny but true!

# Connection to Others - Quite a Challenge During COVID!

- Humans are social beings. We need to interact with and be around other people, ideally in-person. During COVID: improvise and (mostly) find other options to stay connected with others.
- Our “civilized” world has become increasingly isolating - hectic schedules, e-mail inundation, hours and hours on our devices.
- “Belonging” to a social group that meets regularly - book club, hobbies, sports, support group, church, 12 step meetings.... “Fellowship” is not just a church term!

# Connection to Earth, Nature

- Earth is our home, the ultimate source of all life, including our own.



- For 100s of thousands of years, humans were intricately and intimately tied to nature. Our lives depended on it daily.

- Only in the last 100 years or so have we become mostly indoor beings.

- We've lost touch with the rhythms and cycles of nature: the sun's movement during the year, moon cycles, birds singing, growing our own food. "Nature Deficit Disorder"



- Reconnect, or connect possibly for the 1<sup>st</sup> time, with nature.

- Shinrin-yoku - Japanese meaning "Forest Bathing"

# Spiritual or Religious Connection

- If you already have a spiritual or religious practice, great! Maintain it or even enhance it as you feel inspired.
- While respecting those who embrace organized religion, having a spiritual orientation or practice, is not necessarily about believing in “God” or even a “higher power.”
- I rejected religion and even spirituality for decades until I realized that the beauty, diversity and sheer magic of nature was my spirituality.
- For atheists and others that adamantly reject any concept of “spirit”: No problem! Let this one go!

# Take Charge of Your Mental Health!

## Take Charge of Your Depression!

- Whether we're just sad about or unhappy with our lives or dealing with clinical depression, it is ultimately up to us (i.e. me) to do something about it.
- Others can and will help us with our journey back to mental health and happiness, but we're in charge!
- Not easy for those in the deep dark throes of depression. "Taking charge" may mean just taking tiny, tiny steps each day. Making your bed or going for a 10-minute walk can be "taking charge."
- Praise yourself for the actions you are taking to get healthy and happy, however small.

# Applying the Connection Principles

1) Be Patient- Positive change takes time, especially recovering from a bout of depression. There's no single "magic bullet" to feel better right away. Accept that reality rather than fight it or be upset about it.

2) Don't Isolate - "But I don't have a choice not to isolate during COVID." Yes, you do! It's just more of a challenge. Options: Bring back the phone conversation! ZOOM gatherings - support groups, trainings. Have a family "re-ZOOM-ion"! Getting together outside with 1 or 2 others, 8+ feet apart for 45 minutes is COVID-safe.

\* Isolating is very common during depression. Fight it when you feel up to it.

### 3) Get Out of the House!

- During COVID: The “stay at home” message does not mean staying locked inside your home 24/7.
- “Cabin fever” is real - Don’t let it set in.
- Go for a walk in your neighborhood without your smartphone.
- Garden or just “hang” in your backyard.
- Visit a friend in his or her front or backyard.

### 4) Be Wary of Social Media

- Everyone’s life is awesome on Facebook! Especially with depression, it’s easy to think yours isn’t by comparison.
- Lots of angry, disrespectful discourse on SM. Avoid it!
- Social Media “Timeouts” - 2 hours, 4 hours, all day!
- However, on-line support groups can be quite helpful.

## 5) Limit Your News Intake

- 90+% of news is negative
- Stay “COVID informed” but don’t over do it.
- Whether on TV or on-line, consider a news time-out

## 6) Get Outside!

- A little redundant with “Get Out of the House” but that’s on purpose!
- Sun, fresh air, sitting by a creek are all mood enhancers.
- It’s all good. From a walk in your ‘hood, to reading in your backyard, to a challenging hike in the wilderness.
- Be “present”, Be “mindful” - notice and be aware of all around you, the birds chirping, wind rustling the leaves... -
- When possible, leave your cell phone at home or in the car.
- Gardening and Landscaping: soil has “serotonin” a mood-enhancing brain chemical used in antidepressant meds.

## 7) Move Your Body!

- Any form and amount of exercise will help you physically feel better, and feel better about yourself.
- Just 2, 20-minute walks a day can make a big difference.
- Aerobic exercise: For those that can, getting your heart-rate up for 20+ minutes/day can be a big help. “Runners High”.
- If you exercise just once per day, do so in the morning. It will help the rest of your day.

## 8) Ignore those Critical, Negative Voices Inside Your Head!

- While they can be particularly loud and awful during depression, many of us deal with negative voices about ourselves in our heads.
- Ignore them! They don't know what they're talking about! They are not “real”.
- Meditation and simple deep breathing techniques can help quiet those voices. Guided meditation for newcomers.

## 9) Self-help Reading

- Self-help books for both life in general and depression.  
*Emotional Sobriety*, by Tian Dayton
- “Personal growth/journey” novels. e.g. *The Alchemist* by Paul Coehlo, or Pearl S. Buck’s *The Good Earth* (a classic!)

## 10) Healthy Diet

- Often emphasized; often ignored.
- Sugar has been shown to worsen depression.

## 11) Go Easy on the Alcohol and Drugs

- Alcohol is a depressant.
- Medical marijuana - as with many meds, objectively assess the beneficial effects vs. the possible negative side effects.
- You need not be an alcoholic or addict for alcohol & drug use to impair your mental health. Just give it some thought.

## 12) Volunteer/Be of Service to Others

- “To make others happy, be compassionate. To make yourself happy, be compassionate.” - the Dalai Lama

## 13) Embrace “Acceptance”

- Most of what goes on in the world and much of what happens in our personal lives, we have no control over.
- Things in your past are history. We can't change them. Process the painful or regrettable, but try to live for today. This is not meaning to downplay past trauma.
- Acceptance does not mean apathy or complacency.

## 14) Embrace Gratitude

- We often focus on the negative aspects of our lives. Try to focus on the positive aspects - however large or small.
- Periodically make gratitude lists: frequently reacquainting yourself with the “good” in your life.

# More Specific to Depression

## 15) Individual Therapy

- It helps. It works. Be completely honest with your therapist.
- If you're not "clicking" with your therapist, find another.

## 16) Group Therapy

- Dynamic and powerful in a way that's different than individual therapy. Art therapy is often used.
- Others benefit from your story and feedback; you benefit from theirs.
- Confidentiality is pledged and sacrosanct.

## 17) Praise Yourself *Every Time* You Take Charge of Your Depression - However big, however small.

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Antidepressant Meds: A personal decision. Research. Use a psychiatrist, not your PCP.

# A Few More Thoughts...

## Pets and Animals

- “Connecting with nature.” Equine therapy.
- Just before COVID “lockdown”, I rescued Lobo from the animal shelter. Actually, he rescued me!



## Sleep

- Critical for physical and mental health.
- Stop using your smart phone, computer, and TV at least a half hour before going to bed. A dark room is key.
- Consider a “take home” sleep analyses to test for apnea.

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**Be Well. Be Happy. You Deserve to Be!**

Being retired, I have a lot of time on my hands! Feel free to contact me to talk or “chat”. Seriously.

**Thank you! Craig**