

Stop Telling Me to Cheer Up



**A PRACTICAL GUIDE
FOR LIFTING DEPRESSION**

Vivienne Emery

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Last updated: 01/08/2020

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CONTENTS

Introduction	5
Understanding the symptoms of depression	6
Why does Tom feel agitated and yet at the same time flat and listless?	7
Why does Tom feel flat and listless if he has high levels of stress hormones?	7
What can make us vulnerable to this ‘flop’ response?	8
Depression and dream sleep	9
Why do I have low motivation?	10
Why does Tom still feel depressed despite taking antidepressants?	11
How can we reduce our stress levels?	12
The benefits of exercise on your nervous system	13
Reduce the emotional arousal in your mind	14
How can we challenge negative thoughts?	15
Building resilience	16
We all have an innate drive to contribute	17
Reduce emotional arousal by creating meaning and purpose in your life	19
Take action	20
What if I don’t know where to start?	20
Why is it important to set goals?	22
Summary	25
References	28

Introduction

The aim of this guide is to inform you about the latest information on the symptoms and causes of depression. Society continues to tell us that depression is due to changes in brain chemistry and that drugs are the only way to help; if antidepressants were the only answer, however, depression would be a minor issue in today's society.

Treatment for depression has tripled over the last two decades. Up-to-date research has shown that low levels of serotonin don't seem to play a role in whether you get depressed or not and that having low levels of serotonin is the *result* of being depressed and not the cause.¹ Although medication can alleviate some of the symptoms, we need to look at the factors that can make us vulnerable to depression and be aware of more natural and practical ways to relieve it.

Having a new perspective on your symptoms will enable you to explore and use the practical ideas presented in this guide. Understanding why you feel the way you do will empower you to take back control and start to make changes in your life. In order to lift depression quickly and naturally, you need to take an active role in your recovery.

* PLEASE NOTE: To protect confidentiality, the personal details in the case history used in this book have been changed.

Understanding the symptoms of depression

Tom looked at his clock and saw that it was 3am. This was the fourth time this week he had woken up in the early hours of the morning unable to get back to sleep again. Even when he did sleep through the whole night, he woke up feeling more exhausted than he'd been before he went to bed. He would probably call in sick again; he knew he should go to work, but it was such a struggle even to get dressed some mornings and, when he did go in, it was impossible to concentrate. He would normally feel some pleasure in staying home from work and watching morning TV with a cup of coffee, but nothing filled him with joy these days.

It was difficult to find pleasure in anything and he felt miserable most of the time. He had stopped going to the gym and he had cancelled plans with his friends on many occasions. He no longer enjoyed cooking because he didn't seem to have an appetite, and at the weekends he had little interest in doing anything so he often stayed in bed.

He was sick of listening to his family members telling him to cheer up and get a breath of fresh air, because apparently that was supposed to help. He had no motivation to walk to the shower, let alone put on his shoes and go for a walk. Which shoes would he put on and where would he go? Everyday decisions had become too much of a challenge.

His girlfriend had walked out on him three months earlier and he couldn't see himself meeting anyone new. Who would want him in this state? The more he thought about the future – possibly losing his job and never finding another partner – the more fearful he became. Despite having low energy, he often felt agitated inside and was in a constant state of worry about why he was feeling this way. Some days his antidepressants lifted his low mood, but they didn't stop him feeling depressed. The more he focused on his situation, the more hopeless he felt. His thoughts had become quite dark recently and more than once he had considered ending his life; he even had an idea of how he would do it.

If you can relate to any elements in Tom's story, you may be questioning why you feel the way you do. Knowledge is power, so let's begin by looking at Tom's symptoms in more detail using up-to-date explanations for their causes.

Why does Tom feel agitated and yet at the same time flat and listless?

Although it may not feel like it, a depressed brain is actually a very stressed brain and people who are suffering from depression are also suffering from anxiety.² One of the things depressed people share is that they worry. When you worry, you send distress signals to the body and it believes that you must be in danger. Even though there is no real-life threat present, such as a bus coming towards you, the body listens to how worried you are and senses that you are fearful and stressed. It begins to prepare your body to escape this imaginary danger by either running away or staying to fight. To help you do this, your heart rate accelerates and blood is sent to the muscles so you can move and take action. Your breath becomes short and shallow so that you can take in more oxygen, and stress hormones such as adrenalin and cortisol are released. This survival response is known as the fight-or-flight response.

The more worries we have, the longer this response stays active during the day. It may seem strange that a depressed person who comes across as flat and listless is actually highly stressed and full of arousal, but depressed people have very high cortisol levels in their blood even when they report feeling numb.³

Why does Tom feel flat and listless if he has high levels of stress hormones?

The body has two ways that it can respond to stress and anxiety in the body. It can either:

- go into action mode where it hopes to escape and it stimulates you into an alert state (this is the fight-or-flight response)
- believe that there is no hope of escaping and start to activate a shutdown response in the body (this is known as the flop response).

As there seems to be no hope of escape it is pointless to have a continually accelerated heartbeat (and this is also dangerous long term), so the body believes its only chance of survival is to slow down all its processes so that it can tolerate the high levels of stress.

Instead of feeling aroused by anxiety, you shut down and feel numb. You also feel demotivated and disconnected from the world and the people in it.⁴ The difference between anxiety and depression is that with anxiety you feel on edge because your body is preparing to take action and still hopes for a chance to escape, whereas in depression all hope is gone.

The flop response is the complete opposite to fight-or-flight. Instead of having an energetic response when we are stressed, our system shuts down. The body and mind go offline and we flop. It can be hard to shift out of this state, so it is unhelpful simply to tell a depressed person to ‘cheer up’. The body needs to calm down and relax so that it can reduce the anxiety within it.

So, there are two responses to stress: to be in constant fight-or-flight, or to be in flop.⁵ Of course, many people suffer from anxiety and depression at the same time and can experience both. This is because they are two different versions of the same song. You can read more about anxiety and how to lower your level of arousal when you go to www.vivienneemery.com.

What can make us vulnerable to this flop response?

Major external stressors in life, such as losing your job, going through a divorce or grieving the loss of someone close to you, can obviously cause high levels of stress in the body. Stress can also build up slowly when we face smaller internal stressors such as not feeling secure in our relationship or job, losing control over our health or life circumstances, or feeling isolated.

Everyone experiences external and internal stressors, so why is it that sometimes these high levels of anxiety and arousal become so overwhelming that the body starts to shut down? There is now evidence to suggest that when high levels of worry continue, your dream sleep begins to be affected, which in turn can lead to your nervous system being overloaded.⁶

Depression and dream sleep

We saw earlier that Tom was waking up exhausted and often felt more tired than when he went to bed. He tended to wake up in the middle of the night and was unable to get back to sleep again.

Let's look at how the type of sleep you are getting could affect the way you feel.

It's been known since the 1950s that depressed people dream up to three times more than non-depressed people and, over the past few decades, connections have been made between excessive dream sleep (or REM sleep) and depression.⁶

Psychologist Joe Griffin explains how too much worry in the day can lead to over-dreaming at night.⁶ Even if we don't remember our dreams, we all go through dream (or REM) cycles every night when we sleep: all mammals do. We have to do this in order to release the unexpressed arousals from the day.⁶

Normally when we have a problem or concern, the brain follows a process:

1. We worry about it.
2. We take action.
3. The worry is switched off.

There needs to be some conclusion, some way to deactivate the arousal in the body. In order to turn off this worry cycle we can either solve the problem or, if it can't be solved, perceive the worry in a different way so that it no longer seems like a major threat and the worry circuit can be turned off.

If worry is activated but not acted on, it can't just hang around because day after day we would add other worries to this worry. Consequently, the brain releases these worries and other unexpressed emotions from the day during dream sleep to prevent our system becoming overloaded.⁶

The more worries we have during the day that we don't express or act on, the more time we need to spend in dream sleep to release them.⁶ This is a problem because dream sleep is not restful sleep. Electroencephalogram (EEG) recordings show brain-wave activity during dream sleep is the same as when we are awake. If we have a frightening dream, the body releases cortisol and speeds up the heart as if we were being frightened in real life.

After many years of research, Joe Griffin showed that the role of dreaming is to deactivate our daily unexpressed emotional arousals.⁶ It is vital that we enter dream sleep to process unexpressed emotions from the day; however, on average we should only spend around two hours during the night going in and out of dream sleep. Any more than this and there is not enough time left to spend in slow-wave sleep.

Slow-wave sleep repairs bodily tissues and sweeps out brain debris. It helps to restore the body from the wear and tear of the day. The brain cells are recharged and the immune system is boosted. If we are not in slow-wave sleep for a sufficient amount of time, we become more vulnerable to sickness and life-threatening illnesses. We also become more susceptible to fibromyalgia (a condition that causes pain all over the body) because whilst we sleep our body also works on restoring energy and nutrients to worn-out muscles and tissues. Fibromyalgia is a condition that many people with depression suffer from.⁷

I mentioned above that when we dream our brain waves show the same activity as when we are awake, and the body releases stress hormones and activates other bodily processes in order to play out our dreams. If we spend most of the night in dream sleep, it is no wonder we wake up feeling more tired than we did when we went to bed! We have depleted all our energy stores and spent little or no time in slow-wave sleep to replenish them. We then worry the next day about why we feel so tired and start to feel stressed and worried again, creating further arousals that need to be processed.

Why do I have low motivation?

Not only can too much dream sleep deplete your energy stores and cause you to feel extremely tired, but it can also lower your motivation to take action and be interested in life.⁶

Research on brain waves show that a powerful electrical wave passes through the brain as we enter dream sleep. This wave sparks our attention to something new in the environment. If there is a sudden movement near us, or a smell of gas, we are able to pay attention to it quickly. As well as being very useful in life-and-death situations, this electrical wave also motivates us to pay attention to everyday stimuli. Next time you watch TV or a film, notice how often the scene or the angle of the scene changes. Techniques like this are used to keep us engaged and interested.

This electrical wave is activated many times before and during a dream. If we dream too much, we use up all the energy in that area of the brain that would usually keep us motivated and interested during the day. If we can't spend enough time in slow-wave sleep to restore and replenish this area in the brain, we end up with a flat battery. We wake up having very little interest in life and no motivation to complete even small tasks during the day. Life seems meaningless and pointless.

Dream sleep exhausts not only the body but also the brain. People who suffer from anxiety and depression often find themselves waking up in the early hours of the morning unable to get to sleep again. They have spent so much time in dream sleep that their body and brain can no longer continue to process all their worries. The brain decides it is better to wake you up rather than let you continue dreaming.⁶ One of the earliest signs of depression is waking up in the morning and not being able to fall back to sleep.

Why does Tom still feel depressed despite taking antidepressants?

Over-dreaming and not being able to replenish and restore the brain and body during slow-wave sleep leaves you with depleted levels of serotonin.⁸

For many years it was believed that depression was caused by low levels of serotonin, but this is no longer accepted as true.¹ Although many depressed people do have lower levels of serotonin, this is often a *result* of being depressed rather than the cause.

Most types of antidepressants reduce how much time we spend in dream sleep and they raise serotonin levels so that we feel lifted and more motivated during the day.⁹ Taking medication can certainly help to alleviate the symptoms of depression in some people but, as in Tom's case, many people continue to feel depressed despite taking medication. This is because most antidepressants help treat some of the *symptoms* of depression but not the *cause*.¹⁰

***Always seek medical advice before deciding to make any changes to your treatment plan. Never stop taking your medication without prior agreement and support from your doctor.**

How can we reduce our stress levels?

In addition to following medical advice and taking medication you have been prescribed, you could consider trying to reduce your worries and stress levels in order to move out of the flop response and reduce the amount of time spent in dream sleep.

It is important to regularly calm down the nervous system during the day. We all have a natural process to relax the mind and body, it is called the relaxation response and it can be easily activated by having a longer out-breath than in-breath.

If we were to observe our breath whilst relaxing, we would notice that the out-breath is longer than the in-breath. Breathing in this way is a sign to the rest of the body that there is no threat and we can remain calm and at rest. When we are stressed or anxious, we can train our bodies to evoke the relaxation response at will by breathing out for longer than we breathe in. This is a basic law of biology and the quickest way to stimulate the relaxation response. If you breathe in this manner, your body will have no choice but to relax. As soon as your breath changes in this way the rest of the body calms down, reducing the speed of your heart and turning off the adrenalin.

Take a moment to try it now. Breathe in for four, then breathe out for eight. In for four and out for eight. Continue to breathe in this way for five to ten minutes. If it helps, play a relaxing song in the background so that the time passes more quickly.

The more you use and practise it the more natural and easier it becomes and the quicker you can activate the relaxation response.

If you are not comfortable with the count of four and eight, you can choose your own ratio. As long as the outbreath is longer than the in breath your relaxation response will be activated.

Another way to deeply relax the body is to take time out in your day to listen to guided relaxation audios. There is good evidence to show how these practices calm the nervous system and increase our resilience to stress and anxiety.¹¹

It is important to note that the body can continue to hold high levels of stress after a traumatic event. If you believe your depression is linked to traumatic memories, you may need support and guidance to reduce the fear you have in your nervous system. You can read about different therapies that help to neutralise traumatic memories in the e-book *Stop Telling Me to Talk About It*. You can download this for free at vivienneemery.com. You can also download a free audio on this website to help you sleep.

The benefits of exercise on your nervous system

Exercise is a great way to regain flexibility in your nervous system so that you can start to reduce stress in the body and shift out of the flop response. Exercise also improves our mood because when we run, dance or even walk happy chemicals get sent around the body. They move from cell to cell like a wave of pleasure.¹² The reason why you will hear many times that exercise is good for your mental health is because it really is. Some even claim that exercise can lift depression more effectively than antidepressants.¹³

When we exercise and spend time outside in daylight, we boost the production of serotonin. Not only does serotonin stabilise our mood and reduce the anxiety and depression we feel in the body, but at night it is converted into ‘the sleep hormone’ melatonin. The more serotonin you build up in the day, the more likely you are to fall into a deep, restorative sleep at night.

It is important to remember that when certain chemicals in your brain, such as dopamine and serotonin, have been depleted for a long time due to your depression, it can take a while for the levels to increase. If you don't feel a happy buzz at first, try not to give up – and don't be bullied by the voice of depression that tells you not to bother exercising because it doesn't work.

You don't need to force yourself to go to the gym if you think it's the worst thing to do in the world because walking is one of the best forms of exercise. If you go for a walk in natural surroundings, you will be killing two birds with one stone because nature also helps to reduce our stress levels.

***Always check with a doctor before starting a new exercise regime.**

Reduce the emotional arousal in your mind

Once you have lowered the arousal in the body, you can turn your attention to lowering the arousal in your mind by mastering your thoughts and cutting down on how much you worry. We looked at calming the body down first because when people are depressed their emotional arousal is high, and when emotion is high our ability to think in a flexible and rational way is compromised. The more emotional we are, the more our emotional brain is turned up and the more our thinking brain is turned down.¹⁴ Our emotional brain has a very limited and rigid thinking style, known as 'all-or-nothing' thinking. We see things in absolutes, black or white with no grey areas, for example: 'I'm worthless', 'Life is pointless', 'It's all my fault'.

There was evidence of this style of thinking in Tom's story when he thought that he would never be able to find another partner. We also saw that making everyday decisions had become a real challenge for him.

To keep the logical part of the brain engaged for longer and to be able to challenge this rigid way of thinking, first you need to lower the emotion in the body. Once the rational part of the brain is back in charge, you have a better chance of challenging your negative thinking styles.

How can we challenge negative thoughts?

We first need to be aware of them. Psychologist Martin Seligman recognised three thinking styles that fuel depression: how global and pervasive we believe events to be; how personally we take them, and how permanent we think the effects will be.¹⁵

Let's imagine someone who has an open and flexible mindset fails to get a job after having an interview. They may think, 'Oh well, there are other jobs I can apply for. Maybe they already had someone in mind. But at least I have my family to go home to and a possible interview lined up for next week.' A closed and limited mindset would see this negative situation as global and not as an isolated event. They would say, 'My life is ruined.' They would see it as personal and think, 'I'm useless,' and they would see it as permanent – 'I will never find a job.'

Start to become more aware of your thinking patterns by observing your thoughts. Not only will this allow you to separate yourself from them, but it will help you recognise a negative, limited thought when it comes up. If it helps, you could give this negative way of thinking a shape, colour or even a name. For example, when you hear a voice in your head that says, 'Don't bother to make any changes in your life, nothing ever turns out well, so what's the point?' you can reply, 'Oh, hello, voice of doom. That's not actually true. Some things have worked out well in my life, for example...'

There is always a part of you that can step back and observe your thoughts and feelings and feel separate from them. The more you identify with the part of you that is untouched by depression, the easier it becomes to ignore that voice of doom and gloom in your head.

People find it very useful to write down the thoughts they want to challenge and then come up with evidence to show that these thoughts can't be 100% accurate. They might write down 'I'm unlovable' and then come up with reasons why that isn't true. For example, they could write, 'My sister loves me, the dog loves me and I have had loving relationships in the past.' It's important to have more flexibility in your thinking so that you don't see life events and situations as permanent, personal or pervasive.

Writing down your thoughts also allows you to pay more attention to the language you use, because the words you choose to describe your situation can have a huge impact on how you think and feel. Depressive thinking styles tend to catastrophise a situation: 'This is the **worst**

thing that has **ever** happened.’ ‘I will **never** get over this.’ ‘**Nothing** good can come from this.’ ‘I’m **the unluckiest person in the whole world.**’

This is not to say that we should only think in a positive way. If it is raining then it is raining, and there is no point pretending otherwise. The aim is to be able to see a situation as bad but not worse than it really is.

Building resilience

Feeling low and depressed is not the result of what happens in our life but a consequence of the way we react and ascribe meaning to events. We often feel hopeless when we’re depressed because we may have learnt in life that there is nothing that can be done. Even when an opportunity comes our way, we don’t take it because the past has told us nothing will work, so why even try.

This learned behaviour has been observed in animals who are trapped in a cage. At first they try to get out, but after a while they give up. If their cage door is opened they don’t try to escape because they have learned that nothing can be done. Martin Seligman called this ‘learned helplessness’.¹⁵ Only by being dragged through the cage door many times can the animal relearn that situations in life can be different. Nothing in life is permanent; even your brain is able to adapt because it is neuroplastic. When we get stuck, it is because we are stuck in a belief system about what we can or can’t do and what we can or can’t control.

Learning to change how you perceive events will have a direct result on how you feel. The only certainty you can have in life is how you respond to any given situation. When you find yourself face to face with a life event that you can’t do anything about, you can take back some control by choosing how you will react to it.

If you feel you are lacking in ideas or resources to do this, look to someone you admire; look at someone who found strength and resilience in the face of adversity and model yourself on them. They will not only inspire you, but will give you a different perspective on life. How did they overcome their difficulties? How were they able to find their way out of pain and despair? There are so many inspirational stories to choose from that show us just how much pain we can overcome. Look at these examples.

Nick Santonastasso was born with Hanhart syndrome, a rare condition that prevented his limbs from fully growing. He was born with no legs, an under developed right arm, and a left arm which only has one finger. Nick was depressed as a teenager and had many low points, including a time when he no longer wanted to live in his body anymore. He began to realise that he needed to be part of something and to have goals to reach for. He started wrestling and after a lot of hard work made the high school's varsity team. He went on to become a body builder, author and an entrepreneur. Santonastasso says. "The only limits you have are the ones you put on yourself."

At seventeen years old, Henry Fraser had a tragic accident that left him paralysed from the shoulders down. He is now a motivational speaker, author and mouth artist, and lives by the philosophy that every day is a good day.

Nelba Marquez-Greene's six-year-old daughter was killed in the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre. She set up an organisation to help raise awareness of vulnerable youths. She believes the tragedy could have been avoided if more had been done to address the social isolation and mental health problems of the shooter, Adam Lanza.

As a teenager, professional wrestler and mixed martial arts specialist Justin Wren was nearly driven to suicide because of relentless bullying at school. As well as becoming a successful fighter, he founded the charity Fight for the Forgotten.

There are many rich and varied stories like these that we can learn from, and there is most definitely a role model out there for everyone. Keep looking until you find yours. You don't need to do it on your own, or come up with new answers when dealing with your pain; you can learn from how others have coped. Listening to an audio book from the library or online will also give you a break from listening to the voice of doom during the day.

We all have an innate drive to contribute

One of the reasons some of these inspirational people were able to move out of the darkness and into the light is because they managed to shift their focus away from their own troubles and focus on other people.

One of the quickest and surest ways to lift depression is to move your attention away from yourself, your thoughts and your worries. The more you do this, the less arousal and mental anguish you will build up during the day.

Is it selfish to help people in order to help yourself? Not at all – it is a win-win situation. What's more, we have an innate drive to help others. We evolved to contribute to the tribe. When we do something nice for other people (loved ones or strangers), we feel a wave of pleasure everywhere in the brain and body because feel-good chemicals are released. True happiness comes from helping others.

You don't need to start a charity to do this. Look around your community for places where you can volunteer or provide your services. Maybe there is someone in your family who could really do with an extra hand at the moment. Being needed by people allows us to feel significant and valued.

In addition, we start to reconnect with others and reduce how much time we spend on our own. Isolation is a major contributing factor in depression. We are tribal animals, and the body sends out messages of anxiety when we feel alone in the world.

If you are feeling depressed, ask yourself these questions: Do you feel lonely? Do you feel valued in society? Do you feel you contribute? Do you feel connected to others? Your low mood can begin to lift and your anxiety levels can reduce when you start to meet some of these basic human needs.

When faced with difficult life events, we all have a part of us that could easily give up and another part of us that wants to keep trying. Even if you don't believe that there is a part of you that wants to keep going, the fact that you are still here and reading this book shows that sometimes that part of you wins.

How do you make this side of you stronger? You feed it. The inspirational stories you read above were all examples of people who chose to feed that part of themselves that believed there was another way, and starved the other part of themselves that told them to give up.

Reduce emotional arousal by creating meaning and purpose in your life

Another question that needs to be asked is, ‘Do you have meaning and purpose in your life?’ Many people who suffer from depression find it difficult to answer this question. Viktor Frankl would argue that the quickest way to lift depression is to find meaning in life.¹⁶

Viktor Frankl is the founder of logotherapy, a form of psychotherapy that he developed after surviving four different Nazi concentration camps, including Auschwitz, from 1942 to 1945. He was the only member of his family to survive. After his experience in the camps, he developed a theory that individuals can endure the worst of suffering and the most awful circumstances if they can find meaning in them.¹⁶ He studied people, including himself, who continued to survive day after day, week after week, despite appalling conditions and noticed that the reason why some made it and others didn’t came down to whether they found purpose in their suffering. He concluded that the primary motivational force of an individual is to discover and affirm a sense of meaning.

This doesn’t mean you need to become a leader and change the world. Meaning can come from being needed by others, family members, pets, etc. Some people get a lot of meaning and purpose from their job, but if you are someone who sees their job as nothing more than a means to an end it is important to find something that fulfils you in your spare time. Find activities that are creative, challenging and rewarding. Consider joining a cause that you care about; seek out local organisations in your area that you can get involved in. Are there people going through a similar experience to you that could use your help and guidance?

I had a friend who, after going through a difficult divorce, created ‘The Pizza and Wine Club’ for other newly divorced women who were feeling lost and alone. When she started the group online, she was depressed, lonely and bored. Now the group has grown to 103 members and she spends her time counselling some of these women and organising nights out. Not only has this given her a purpose, but it has also given her a community of new friends. Her involvement in the group meets her need to contribute and to feel valued. When we start to improve and make changes in one area in our lives, it can have a ripple effect on everything else.

Take action

We often feel low and depressed when something in our life isn't the way it should be. Look carefully at your life and be honest with yourself. If life isn't working for you, why not?

Which area is holding you back from living the life you want?

We can become stuck when something we really wanted doesn't work out, such as a relationship, a job, a dream. When an important door closes, we tend to stare at it and will it to open again. We may even keep turning the handle but to no avail. Sometimes in life an important door needs to be firmly shut before other doors can be opened, but we won't know until we try the handles of the other doors.

If you don't take action soon, how different will your life be in five- or ten-years' time? It's important to have a clear understanding of where you are right now and where you want to go, then you can come up with a map to get there. Will it be uncomfortable and difficult? Of course, it will – that's how you know it is working. We think we want a life that is predictable and certain, but we actually have a strong, innate need for variety and unpredictability. When life is the same day in, day out, we often feel numb. We wouldn't watch a football game over and over if we knew the result, or feel excited about watching a new movie if we knew exactly what was going to happen to all the characters and when. An element of uncertainty makes us feel alive!

What if I don't know where to start?

The answer to that is to start small. Create one small, specific goal that you know is achievable, realistic and has a time limit. These types of goals are known as SMART goals.¹⁷

This stands for:

Specific – What do you want to achieve?

Meaningful – Why is this goal important to you?

Action orientated – What steps will you take to achieve it?

Realistic – How do you know that you can achieve this goal?

Time-related – By when do you want to achieve this goal?

Get a pen and piece of paper and use SMART to create your first small, realistic goal that you believe is possible to achieve. If your initial idea seems too big, break it down into smaller steps and bite-size goals that you know you can see through to the end.

Deciding to incorporate a healthy morning routine into the day could be a new goal. This is quite big, so let's narrow it down.

S – The first step would be to have a set time in the morning not only to wake up but to get up. This makes the goal **S**pecific.

M – You then need a reason to do it so that it becomes **M**eaningful. Not only will sleeping less in the day increase how much you sleep at night, it will show you that you are able to ignore that voice of doom that tells you not to bother getting up.

A – Next are the **A**ction steps. You could set an alarm clock and place it a metre or so away from the bed so that you have to get up to turn it off. Then have a chair or pillows in the room so that even if you get up and sit on the chair and close your eyes, at least you are not in bed. You could write down the excuses your depression will come up with in the morning to not get up so that you are ready for them.

R - Consider how **R**ealistic this goal is for you. Asking yourself to leap up out of bed and go for a run may not be a realistic goal right now, but do you think it is possible to get up and move away from the bed and onto a chair at an earlier time than usual?

T – Finally, you need to make the goal **T**ime-related, so decide when you will take action. You could aim to do it three or four times this week, starting from tomorrow.

Once you have put this step in place and acted on it, have another goal ready to go. What could you add next to your new morning routine? A healthy breakfast? We all know we should be eating a balanced diet, but we also need to be more aware of just how much a healthy diet can affect our mood. An unhealthy gut is the cause of a lot of mental and physical health issues.¹⁸

Looking after yourself by carefully choosing what you eat is a good way to begin taking back some control in your life. When you're suffering from depression you can feel hopeless and

helpless. Having a sense of control in your life, no matter how small, will help to lower your arousal. It will also build your confidence when you're trying to ignore the voice of depression. The more you stand up to this voice of doom and show it who is boss, the less it will push you around.

Once you start to achieve small goals in one area of your life, you'll begin to believe that you can do the same in other areas of your life. The more goals you set and complete, the more you will believe that you can do anything. When setting new goals, continue to ask yourself 'Where am I now?', 'Where would I like to be?', and 'What steps can I take to get there?'

Make sure you always go through the SMART letters when creating goals so that you stand more of a chance of achieving them.

Why is it important to set goals?

We're told so many times that we must have a goal to aim for that we may start to roll our eyes, but the fact is that it is true. Think of a time you struggled to get something you wanted and how good it felt when you got it, especially the journey to get there. The brain releases dopamine and happy chemicals all the time when you set goals and work towards achieving them; it is what the brain lives for. It releases a wave of pleasure chemicals to motivate you to go out and do it again and again.

A sure way into depression is to no longer have a goal. There are numerous examples of famous celebrities or top athletes who have achieved their life-long goal to be number one in their field, only to sink into a depression shortly afterwards. After achieving their one and only goal in life, they felt lost and empty. This is why it is important to have other goals waiting in line.

British boxer Tyson Fury fell into a depression after achieving his life-long dream of becoming heavyweight champion of the world. He pulled himself out of it a couple of years later when he decided to make his comeback – he had set himself a new goal!

Setting goals not only gives us a purpose in life, it also allows us to learn and grow. The brain doesn't want to sit still. We may give it treats like a new TV box set or ice cream and chocolate to keep it quiet for a while so that we can't hear the message that it is constantly

sending us to go out and do something. We may even feel that box sets and ice-cream represent true happiness at times, but deep down we are not as fulfilled or as happy as we could be. This is why we start to feel discontented and after a while may start overeating or turning to other unhealthy habits such as gambling, using alcohol and excessive shopping to keep this message turned down low.

If you are suffering from severe depression, don't wait until you wake up feeling motivated before you start to make goals. It will never happen! You need to come up with goals and take action, despite every cell in your body telling you not to. If you keep going and continue to ignore that voice of depression, you will start to win; the brain will start to reward you and you will feel naturally lifted and motivated. The level of arousal in your body will start to lower and you will need to spend less time in dream sleep, which will also have a positive effect on your energy and motivation levels.

The brain lives and breathes goals; it wants to be active all the time. We feel numb when we stop growing. Everything in life must grow and develop or it dies: plants, relationships, our desire and motivation. Our brains are problem-solving machines and never stop wanting to stretch and grow. If you feel stuck, dead or numb inside, it is because you have stopped challenging yourself. That voice of doom doesn't want you to grow and feel alive because the longer you stay stuck, the longer it gets to stick around in your head. That voice knows exactly what it is doing when it tells you to stay in bed. The sooner you turn the volume down on this voice and turn up the volume on your own, the better life will be.

One of the reasons why suicide can seem like an option when suffering from depression is because it feels like a solution and, as I mentioned above, the brain likes to solve problems. Ending your life, however, is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. It may feel like your only option because it is your emotional brain that has come up with this idea. We saw earlier that when we are emotionally aroused the thinking brain is turned down and the emotional brain is turned up, and the emotional brain can only think in absolutes. It uses all-or-nothing thinking: live or die, run or stay and fight. There are no grey areas in between.

When you are lying flat on your back having hit rock bottom, there is nowhere else to go but forward. This is a good time to consider making goals and trying something you've never

dreamed of trying. The worse that can happen is that you fail – and failure only truly occurs when you stop trying.

If you follow through on your goal one day but not on the next, don't beat yourself up. When you stumble, it is a good time to stop and learn from the experience. What stopped you from following through? Did you listen to the voice of doom? Did it take back control that day? How can you stay strong the next time this happens?

Every form of adversity is a lesson to be learned from. Either try again or try a new strategy. After Thomas Edison's seven-hundredth unsuccessful attempt to invent the electric light bulb, he was asked by a reporter how it felt to have failed so many times. He famously answered,

“I have not failed seven hundred times. I have not failed once. I have succeeded in proving that those seven hundred ways will not work. When I have eliminated all the ways that will not work, I will find the way that will work.”

He finally did find a way on his ten thousandth attempt! Can you imagine starting again 10,000 times? Not only did Edison light up our homes and cities, but he also demonstrated that we only fail when we give up.

Summary

Things do not change; we change. - Henry David Thoreau

Suffering from depression can leave you feeling exhausted, demotivated and disinterested in life. The aim of this book is to shed light on some of the reasons behind these symptoms and to offer practical tools to alleviate them.

Any treatment for depression should have an element of relaxation training to reduce the anxiety and stress in the nervous system. This will not only help you to move out of the flop response, but will also reduce the amount of time you spend in dream sleep.

Here is a review of the different ways you can begin to lower the emotional arousal in your mind and body to lift yourself out of depression naturally.

- Use your breath to stimulate the relaxation response. For example, breathe out for longer than you breathe in.
- Listen to guided relaxation audios to calm the nervous system during the day.
- Once the body is calmer, the thinking brain will come back online. You can then start to challenge negative thinking styles.
- Keep a journal to help you analyse your thoughts and the language you use.
- Try to exercise more to keep your nervous system calm and flexible and to release a wave of feel-good chemicals around the body.
- Practise changing your focus. We feel what we focus on.
- Have a role model and be inspired. Listen to autobiographies online or from the library to give you a new focus and a different perspective on life.
- Separate yourself from the voice of depression. Practise observing your thoughts and feelings so that you don't get pushed around and bullied by that voice of doom.
- Create SMART goals that are realistic and achievable. Goals allow us to stretch and grow, and give us a purpose.
- Join local organisations or find creative activities to create more meaning and purpose in your life.

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- Find ways to contribute more and help others. This will shift the focus away from you, your thoughts and your worries. The quickest way to lift depression is to focus on others. It will reduce how much you ruminate during the day, which in turn will reduce the arousal and stress in your nervous system.
 - Take back control. Have a morning routine, choose to eat a healthy diet or decide to ignore the voice of doom. Do things your brain would normally tell you not to do, like going for a walk or signing up for a new activity. Find small ways to feel in charge of your life.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Freedom from anxiety in 5 steps: The ultimate guide to liberating yourself from stress and anxiety

Stop telling me to talk about it: All you need to know to overcome trauma

For more information on Vivienne Emery and her books, courses and training go to www.vivienneemery.com

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