

a series of fact sheets written
by experts in the field of liver
disease

HCV and Mental Health: Depression: Self-Help Tips

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Depression is a medical illness that affects between 5 and 20% of the adult population in the United States. People living with hepatitis C (HCV) are at greater risk for depression, especially during treatment. Help for depression can come in a variety of ways. Sometimes mild depression can be improved with self-help measures alone. Prolonged or severe depression usually requires professional treatment. The information in this fact sheet is solely for informational purposes and is not intended to replace medical advice.

Important Note: If you have thoughts of suicide or hurting yourself or others, seek immediate professional help.

Sometimes professional intervention and self-help measures can reinforce each other. The mind and the body are not separate or independent from each other. Your body affects your mind and your mind affects your body. Stress can weaken the immune system and make it harder to resist diseases. Feeling unwell can lead to increased fatigue and more depression. Breaking the cycle of depression usually involves a mind-body approach.

Ways to Help Yourself

Start with Accurate Information

Taking care of yourself begins with building a strong foundation of reliable information. Start by separating fact from fiction. Patients sometimes hear or read something that is incorrect which may inadvertently lead them to believe their health or prognosis is worse than it really is. The Internet is a valuable tool, but not always reliable. Know your sources and do not settle for anything less than the most current and accurate information. Write down questions that you have and bring them to visits with your doctor so that you cover all of your concerns.

Attend Support Group Meetings

Support goes hand-in-hand with gathering good information. A solid infrastructure of support can provide a variety of resources. For instance, patients not only share their experiences with depression and HCV, they may talk about their favorite doctors, how they handle certain medication side effects, and provide helpful tips on managing their illness. Most patients find it valuable to be with others who share the same experiences as they do, where they can be among others without having to explain themselves.

Exercise

Exercise is probably the single most effective self-help antidote for fatigue and mild depression. This is hard to fathom, especially if getting out of bed is an ordeal. Like most things, exercise is best practiced in moderation. If you are unaccustomed to exercise, have a complicated medical condition, or are over 50 years old, it is advisable to speak to your health care provider before embarking on this. If you are ready to take this on, start slowly.

Five to fifteen minute intervals, two to three times daily, can fend off relentless fatigue. This is especially true if you can practice this in a relaxing environment, such as at a park. Remember that 5 minutes of exercise is better than no exercise! Resist the all or nothing temptation. Also, resist the temptation to over-exercise.

Balance is the key. When it comes to exercise, there are many activities from which to choose. Walking is perfect because it requires no special equipment except comfortable shoes. Biking, swimming, dancing, and gardening can be fun as well

as therapeutic. Yoga, Tai Chi, Qigong, and Pilates are highly regarded as beneficial activities. As you venture into the realm of exercise, include stretching as part of your regimen. Start slowly and increase your activity according to how your body responds. Even if you don't want to, go outside and feel the fresh air on your face. The goal is to find a balance of activity that revitalizes you during the day and promotes sleep at night.

Sleep

Inadequate or poor quality of sleep can lead to feelings of daytime tiredness. Make sure you are getting sufficient sleep. The National Sleep Foundation states that the average adult needs seven to nine hours of sleep per night. If you believe that insufficient sleep is a problem, talk to your doctor. Sleep issues are well understood and much can be done to improve the quality of sleep.

Good Nutrition

Try to eat a low fat, high fiber diet. Eat a variety of foods that includes fruit, vegetables, and whole grains. Eating well does not take a lot of effort, but may involve a little planning. There are plenty of healthy food choices available without having to cook from scratch. For instance, toss pre-cut vegetables into soup, a salad, or an omelet. Fast food restaurants now offer healthy alternatives to the usual fried fare. A sandwich made from whole grain bread and piled high with vegetables is simple, healthy, and delicious.

Balance Rest and Activity

Schedule a daily rest period. Rest is like fuel for the body. Just as you plan to put fuel in your car, do the same for your body. Consider resting as a preventative measure and try to rest before you get too fatigued. Those times you feel more energetic, resist the temptation to skip a rest break. This will only lead to increased inefficiency or fatigue later. Balance is the key. Pace yourself, take breaks, plan ahead, and delegate. Ask for help. Create short cuts. Organize your work areas so you can work more efficiently. Break large tasks into smaller ones, and do what you can, as you are able.

Learn to Manage Stress

Too much stress can worsen the symptoms of depression and take a toll on one's health. Avoiding unnecessary stress is easier said than done. There are many types of stress management techniques. Yoga, meditation, and stress management classes are a few examples. Some employers, HMOs, and adult education services offer stress management classes.

Substance Use

Alcohol, tobacco, excess caffeine and illicit drugs can cause or worsen depression and anxiety. Alcohol is a depressant and is incompatible with HCV. The psychological and physical impact of illicit drug use is well-documented. Tobacco and caffeine are stimulants and can cause increased anxiety. Although quitting the use of these substances can be difficult, it can be done. There is help available for all sorts of substance cessation. Ask your doctor for available resources in your community.

Positive Thinking

Positive thinking is a learned skill. Performed on a regular basis, positive thinking can replace negative thinking. Positive thinking can be a useful tool in overcoming inertia. Start slowly. Pick a negative phrase or two and turn it into a positive message. For instance, if you find yourself thinking you will never get well, try saying to yourself, "This too shall pass." If you are saying to yourself, "I am never going to learn how to do such-and-such," substitute, "I am a work in progress" or "Even a Stradivarius has to be retuned constantly." Practice positive thinking even if you do not believe it. Over time, positive thinking can become a habit, and can help improve many aspects of your health.

Laughter and Recreation

Finding pleasurable activities that you can participate in may improve your mood and prevent thoughts and feelings that can contribute to depression. Try to pick at least one pleasurable activity and find the time to do it often. Finally, it is worth promoting something that can be infectious: laughter. Having HCV can be painful and burdensome – if we let it. Laughter is not a cure, but it can lighten the load. Humor has no side effects except perhaps a few laughs. It is contagious, feels good and doesn't need a doctor's order. Prescribe it for yourself today!

Seek Support from Family and Friends

Isolation is the partner of depression and negative thinking. Those who are depressed may remove themselves from social interactions and shun offers of help. Get support even if you do not want it. Depression is a medical illness and you don't have to go through this alone.

Warning: Those taking HCV or HIV protease inhibitors should avoid St. John's wort.

Disclaimer: The diagnosis and treatment of psychiatric and other medical disorders requires a trained medical professional.

Information contained in this factsheet is intended for educational purposes only. It should NOT be used as a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment of any mental/psychiatric disorders. Please consult a medical professional if the information here leads you to believe you or someone you know may have a psychiatric or other medical illness.

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Resources:

SLEEP

The National Sleep Foundation

1522 K Street, NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 347-3471
www.sleepfoundation.org

SMOKING CESSATION

SmokeFree.gov

(800) QUITNOW or (800)784-8669
www.smokefree.gov

National Cancer Institute and the University of Rochester's Clear Horizons

(800) 422-6237
www.myclearhorizons.com

SUBSTANCE USE

Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

www.samhsa.gov
(800) 789-2647
To order publications:
(877)SAMHSA-7 (877) 726-4727

Alcoholic Anonymous (AA)

To find an AA group near you, look for "Alcoholics Anonymous" in any telephone directory or contact:
AA World Service
(212) 870-3400
www.alcoholics-anonymous.org

Narcotic Anonymous (NA)

www.na.org
To find an NA group near you, look in your local telephone directory or contact:
NA World
(818) 773-9999
www.na.org

Visit the HCV Advocate
Web Site:
www.hcvadvocate.org

Below are just some of the publications and services you can find at www.hcvadvocate.org:

- HCV Advocate Monthly Newsletter
- Educational Materials and Fact Sheets in English, Spanish, French, Hmong, Vietnamese, Russian, Tagalog, Somali, Korean and Chinese
- Medical Writers' Circle
- Hepatitis Journal Review
- Disability & Benefits Column
- Hepatitis B information
- HIV/HCV Coinfection information
- Support Group Listings for USA, Canada and Elsewhere
- Physician Locator (USA)
- Links to Clinical Trials
- Links to Other Helpful Organizations
- Event Listings
- Fact Sheet Series:
 - * Easy C Facts
 - * Basics
 - * HCSP Fact Sheets

For more information about hepatitis C, hepatitis B and HCV coinfections, please visit www.hcvadvocate.org.

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The information in this fact sheet is designed to help you understand and manage HCV and is not intended as medical advice. All persons with HCV should consult a medical practitioner for diagnosis and treatment of HCV.

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