



**Mood Disorders** Society of Canada  
Société pour **les troubles de l'humeur** du Canada

[www.mooddorderscanada.ca](http://www.mooddorderscanada.ca)



What  
better  
feels like

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## A Guide to Maintaining Wellness

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Researcher and author: Barbara Everett Ph.D.

With special thanks to interviewees:

**Anne**

**Chris**

**David**

**Deanna**

**Heather**

**John L**

**John S**

**Lori**

**Lucy**

**Nancy**

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## Preamble

In the Mood Disorders Society of Canada’s project, **What better feels like**, 10 people who had experienced depression were interviewed about their experiences. Each one emphasized the **importance of maintaining their wellness**, once *better* was achieved.



This guide is based on what they learned. Their actual words punctuate sections of the guide to provide emphasis and insight into its various aspects.

*“Wellness is a living organism that requires daily awareness. It is always front of mind. It is my responsibility to keep myself healthy.” ~Nancy*

### *An introduction to the interviewees*

(For full details, refer to “What *Better* Feels Like: Answers From People Who Have Experienced Depression” available on Mood Disorders Society of Canada Website:

[www.mooddisorderscanada.ca/page/what-better-feels-like](http://www.mooddisorderscanada.ca/page/what-better-feels-like))

**Anne:** “A really important thing for me has been involvement with the activity centre funded by our province. The slogan of our centre is “we’re better when we’re together” and that is really true...”

**Chris:** “I have been hesitant to engage with professional caregivers. I am not helpless. I have most always been employed. I’m not poor so I don’t look like the stereotype of mental illness. And there is part of me that says, “Come on. Why are

you struggling? This is just selfish.” So it has been a challenge to be honest with my psychiatrist...”

**David:** “I would like to say to people who are having my experience that the way you are feeling is not reality. Depression fools you into thinking things are a whole lot worse than they are. It tricks you...”

**Deanna:** “The waiting lists for mental health care in this province are atrocious. You can get people back



to productivity if they get help quickly...”

**Heather:** “My number one ingredient is quality counselling support. The key word here is *quality*. Counsellors can have very different approaches and that needs to be tailored to what I need. Secondly, peer support is essential... Thirdly, for me is the extensive use of self-help resources... Fourthly, it is crucial to build myself physically. Regular exercise is very important....”

**John L:** “I was one of the founding members of the Moncton Hard of Hearing Group. Four people worked together to establish it and I was one. I was born with moderate hearing loss and I didn’t have decent hearing aids until my mid-thirties. There was tremendous support through that organization and the accomplishment of starting it was important to me...”

**John S:** “People have control over their own destiny. Others may tell us what’s right and what’s wrong with our care but, if we don’t speak up, we will get what we deserve...”

**Lori:** “I have lots of grievances about the hospital. The hospital environment needs to change – with input from those people who have to endure it. There are lots of good intentions, lots of science behind what people are trying to do but the indignities – the compromise in people’s pride...”

**Lucy:** “It is important to keep your physician involved. I have a very good family physician and can ask my questions...”

**Nancy:** “I fully engaged in all the support and advice that was provided. I had to. I had no option. I knew I would die if I didn’t. I watched the people who attended rehab with me, you could see some people were really engaged and others weren’t...”



## Introduction

Many of the interviewees reported that they struggled with depression, sometimes for years, before they came crashing down. It's not uncommon for people to pay little attention to their health – until they don't have it anymore.



Many of the common symptoms of depression are serious barriers to taking action on behalf of your own health and working towards restoring and maintaining wellness.

Interviewees identified their symptoms as:

- an overwhelming need for sleep,
- the pain of waking up in the morning,
- the loss of interest in food,
- sadness, misery and heaviness,
- overpowering negative thoughts,
- the loss of attention and focus,
- feelings of failure and self-blame,
- the need to be away from people.

While it is important to acknowledge that taking action to support your own wellness is hard, it is also true that it is not impossible.<sup>2</sup>

This guide doesn't pretend that working on your wellness will be easy. It doesn't preach and it doesn't wag a finger at you to make you feel guilty. What it does is offer you a place to start – actually many places to start. This is a journey of a thousand miles so, as the philosopher says, let's begin with the first step.

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<sup>2</sup> Dealing with depression from [www.helpguide.org](http://www.helpguide.org)



## What *better* feels like



*"I don't see myself as recovered but in the process of recovery." ~ Chris*

Many interviewees agreed. *Better* is not a destination but a journey. *Better* means feeling lighter, having more energy and looking forward to the day. It means enjoying the little things in life and being grateful to be alive.



*"It's the feeling that tomorrow will be even better." ~ Heather*



*"It's having a sense of worth and value. A sense of contentment – which is deeper than just moments of enjoyment or happiness." ~ John L.*

## What is wellness?

What is wellness seems like a silly question but our culture tends to define wellness narrowly – in terms of physical health only. However, there are more dimensions to wellness: physical health, to be sure, but also mental (brain), emotional, and spiritual health. Another dimension is feelings of belonging – to your family, to a circle of friends, and to your community. And a final one is having a sense of purpose – finding a way to contribute through work, volunteering, donating, being a friend to someone in need – the options are many.

## Being worthy of wellness

You know all this. But, as with so many things in life, knowing and doing are two different things.

One barrier to actively working on wellness is that some people feel they are not worth the effort. Many interviewees reported that they struggled with the idea that they deserved to be well.



*"Our culture says don't be so selfish. So I have to consciously say to myself – and to others – that it's OK for me to go home, lie on my couch and just be with my cat. I have to do that." ~ Anne*





*“I was so busy caring for everyone else that I’d forgotten about my own needs. I had to take care of myself or I wasn’t going to be able to take care of anyone else.” ~ Lucy*

Another barrier to action is the belief that wellness just *happens*. Some people are lucky and others are not. There is some truth in this. Wellness can be harder work for some than for others. But it is also true that wellness is work for everyone.

There can be a lot of reasons not to work, and work hard, on your own wellness. But your recovery depends on it. So, the question is not, “Why should I bother?” but “Where do I start?”

### **Start small but start.**

Where you start will be up to you. This guide provides many choices. Pick one that appeals to you. Identify the smallest step you can take towards wellness. Allowing yourself to start small will be difficult because people with depression can be tremendously critical of themselves. Small is wimpy, embarrassing, or not representative of the person you know yourself to be. Self-criticism can be highly creative so these comments may not match yours. The point here is that if you don’t allow yourself to start small and, instead, you take on too much, your decision might lead to failure and even more self-criticism. Keep it small and manageable and then – this will be hard too – reward yourself for taking that one small step. Remember, the key is to start somewhere – anywhere – but start. And then give yourself a pat on the back.



## One step at a time

The other thing to remember is that each small step you take builds on the one before. Small steps add up and, after a few weeks or a month or so, you will look back and see progress. Sometimes, people with depression are the last to recognize positive movement so ask a friend. They can objectively report on the changes they have observed. Mark this moment in time – you are going forward.



*“The frequent reinforcements my counsellor gives me are helpful – when she is seeing small signs of improvement that I can’t see in myself. She reiterates that there will be more improvements. My ‘logical’ brain accepts what she says to be true, even if my ‘depressed’ brain does not feel it to be true.” ~ Heather*

Steps backward can also happen. You can slip. The good news is that you’re human. The bad news is that you might blame yourself and fill up your mind with negative thoughts. Everyone has a step back now and again. The key is to recognize it for what it is (completely normal) and push forward with another step. And then another.



*“If I have a setback, I can take it in stride and not feel like I’m falling into a deep dark pit.” ~ David*



## The wellness guide



This guide is broken down into the dimensions of wellness: physical, mental (brain), emotional, and spiritual health, as well as finding a sense of belonging and purpose. It also has sections on knowing the signs of relapse and taking action and your role in your relationships with professional caregivers. Each section will suggest a place to start but the discussion might spark your own ideas of a starting point. No matter. At the risk of being repetitive – the key is to start.

### Physical health

Because our culture primarily focuses its attention on physical health, this may be a place to begin. People will recognize and encourage your effort because they will understand what you are trying to accomplish.

Here are some places to start.

#### *Get a physical*

When was the last time you visited a doctor and had a physical? If the answer was more than a year ago, you have a place to start. Make an appointment.

#### *Manage chronic illness*

Do you have any physical illnesses? The mind and the body are linked and it is not uncommon for people with depression to have one or more physical illnesses. So the question here is, are you doing all you can to manage your physical illness? If you are not, get some advice and *think seriously* about following it.

#### *Do you have a problem?*

Are you a smoker? Do you drink to excess? Do you over-medicate yourself in ways that could lead (or already has led) to addiction?





*“Drinking a bottle of wine a day will tell you you’re not getting better.”*

~ John L.

Are you gambling to excess or spending inordinate amounts of time online? Are these activities affecting your work? Relationships? Financial stability? Given the emotional pain associated with depression, it is not uncommon for people to try to soothe themselves with substances or activities that can, in themselves, create further harm. Addiction is called the disease of denial because people are ashamed of what they are doing yet can’t seem to stop. There is help but first, you have to tell the truth. So, a place to start here is to answer the question, do I have a problem? If you have trouble answering honestly, you’re not at the point where you can take advantage of help but you’re getting closer.

### ***Three important things: exercise, eat well, and get your sleep***

All interviewees emphasized the importance of these three things.



*“I’d taken my health for granted before and didn’t eat properly and my sleep was poor. So, it’s do what your mother told you. Take care of yourself.”* ~ John S.

### **Move**

We all know exercise is good for us. The trouble is, if it’s such a good thing, why do so many people dislike the thought of it? One answer may be that they define exercise as running a marathon and nothing less. Another may be that they don’t feel that taking it one step at a time counts. Get yourself to the side of the bed, put your feet on the floor and stand up. Sit down, stand up, sit down, and stand up. You’re exercising. No, you’re not ready for a marathon – but you’ve taken your first step. Do you like to dance? Garden? Take a walk? That’s exercise too.<sup>3</sup> The key is to move.

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<sup>3</sup> From *Fitness 101: The absolute beginner’s guide to exercise*, see: <http://www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise/guide/fitness-beginners-guide>



## Eat well

Would you say that you eat a healthy diet? We all know the saying, “You are what you eat.” There is plenty of advice regarding diet – perhaps too much. Author, Michael Pollen, offers possibly the most succinct diet advice to be found. “Eat food (by this, he means *real* food). Not too much. Mostly plants. And don’t eat anything your grandmother wouldn’t recognize.” That pretty much sums it up.<sup>4</sup> Where to start? If you are eating the wrong things and too much (or too little) of them, then say so. And take it from there.

## Sleep

Depression interrupts your sleep patterns. Humans are hard wired for circadian rhythms, meaning that we sleep at night and are up during the day. Studies of people who work shifts and those experiencing jet lag have shown just how hard it is on the human body – and on brain functioning – when the natural circadian rhythm is interrupted. Getting back to normal sleep patterns will not be easy. Your doctor may prescribe some sleep medication to get you started but, typically, he or she will not want you to continue with medication for very long. A place for you to start is to ensure that you are in bed at night – all night – and you are up during the whole day. This will be hard work. Staying in bed when you are having trouble getting or staying asleep is frustrating, as is staying up during the day when you are bone tired. But re-establishing your circadian rhythm is essential to your wellness. Stay with it and, as your mood lifts, it will become more natural.



*“(When I’m better), my body feels good. I want to exercise instead of feeling like I have to force myself.” ~ David*



*“The body also has to have what it needs in order to run properly and maintain physical, emotional and mental health. You can’t run a car without gas and the body is the same. It needs fuel to operate.” ~ Lucy*



*“Sleep hygiene is critical. If I miss even one night of good sleep – if I stay up too late or don’t sleep well, it has an effect. Exercise is important – not the exhaust yourself type but exercise that is targeted like yoga or Pilates. And I belly dance! Regular meals... I shouldn’t get hungry.” ~ Deanna*

<sup>4</sup> See [www.michaelpollan.com](http://www.michaelpollan.com)



### ***Look good, feel better***

How are you looking these days? Are you hanging around the house in sweats with bed head and bad breath? One of the symptoms of depression is to forget about grooming and self-care and enter the downward spiral that this sort of neglect would predict. Perhaps it's time to take a little advice from people who are dealing with cancer. Look good, feel better.<sup>5</sup> The fact that how you look affects how you feel may not, at first, seem obvious but think about it. When was the last time you were dressed to the nines? Felt pretty good and why? Because you were proud of how you looked and by extension, proud of yourself. So here's another place to start. Have a look in the mirror and then at the Look good, feel better program. Sure, it's for cancer patients and it's for women – but that hardly matters. The message is there for anyone. Spruce yourself up and see how good it feels.

## **Mental (brain) health**

One of the aspects of mental health that our culture is familiar with is intellectual accomplishment. So, for this discussion, let's think of this topic as brain health with three parts: ensuring a healthy brain, keeping an active mind and help for your memory.

### ***Healthy brains***

Just like any other part of your body, the brain needs to live on good food. There are many recommendations about what nutritionists (and your mother) call brain food but it boils down to a healthy diet plain and simple. Also, protect your head. Use your seat belts and wear a helmet when cycling or on an ATV. Your brain will thank you.

### ***An active mind***

The brain needs exercise. There are hundreds of ways to keep mentally active. However, the heavier the lifting, the better it is for the mind. Consider learning a new language or skill (for example, learning to draw, going back to school or playing a sport) – that will challenge the grey cells. Write letters to the editor or debate politics – if you can maintain your cool in the heat of the battle. A small step to take is to identify one thing you can do to activate your mind – but be sure that's it's fun. The heavy lifting can come later.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://lookgoodfeelbetter.org/>



### ***Help for your memory***

There are numerous games and computer programs which claim to improve memory but the science around whether they actually work is missing. Nonetheless, they're fun. The low-tech approach to improving your memory is, wait for it, write things down. Keep a diary with "notes to self." Enter phone numbers into your cell. Use your appointment calendar. Put your keys in exactly the same spot each day – same with your glasses. Use whatever tactic works for you – and use it without shame because with simple and smart aids, you'll look like a memory rock star to your friends. The first step here could be buying a small notebook that will fit into your pocket or purse. The second step will be – use it.

## **Emotional health**

Emotional health is the place where our culture goes silent. There are no courses in school. There are no disability payments for poor emotional health. Many of us grow up un-attuned to our own emotions and some of us are actively taught to suppress them. "Big girls and boys don't cry." Well, they do.

### ***Name it***



*"I need to identify what I'm feeling – being really clear about what I'm feeling – naming it. I have to know that I'm angry or that I'm grieving – not that I'm just 'upset.' I need to focus on what anger feels like before I am able to understand what I'm angry about. I try to do this with my daughter now – get her to name the emotions she is feeling so she'll have the vocabulary when she grows up and may be able to avoid what happened to me by recognizing signs earlier and being able to identify the emotions that go with them." ~ Deanna*



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A place to start is simply naming the emotions. There aren't, in fact, a lot of them. Sadness, anger, shame, happiness, guilt, fear, love, disgust, hate and desire. Then there are the degrees; happiness becomes euphoria, anger becomes rage, and sadness becomes despair. You may come up with a few more ideas, but this is a fair beginning. A second step will be to name the emotions you are feeling- right now. Becoming aware of what you are feeling is the beginning of action.

### ***Self-talk***



*"I used to stand in front of the mirror and give myself a good talking to. 'You can do this! You will be fine!' At the end of the day, I would write down all the good things that had happened to me. I had to do that every day, then every couple of days and then less and less. It just got easier as time went on." ~ Lucy*



*"I need to be diligent about my own positive self-talk and give myself messages of worth, value and significance. When you didn't get those messages as a kid, it's a challenge." ~ Chris*

We all have a sound track running in our heads. Mostly, we're not even aware of how we talk to ourselves. Some of us have optimistic sound tracks: Life is good, things will work out, good things come to those who wait, and on and on it runs. People with depression have pessimistic sound tracks –like the music in movies when something bad is about to happen: Things never work out, Why try, I'll only fail, I am unlovable, I hate myself, Everyone else has it better than me, Life stinks – and on and on it spools.



Cognitive behavioural therapy is recommended for people with depression and interviewees confirmed that it truly did help them. Its role is to connect the dots between thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Unrelenting negative self-talk (your thoughts ) affect your feelings (they bring you down) and people who are down behave in particular ways that can be self-defeating, negative, angry and anxious. Who wouldn't be in the face of an ongoing stream of criticism. A place to start is to recognize that this criticism is coming from *you*. It's a habit you've likely had for years and years. Habits are hard to change but not impossible. Ask yourself this question, Why am I so hard on myself? The answer will be one more step on your journey to wellness.

### ***Stress relief***



*"Stress management is very important – how I deal with stress. I know that the only people who don't have stress are dead so everyone has to deal with stress. So now, I choose my activities carefully and let others go to this meeting or that meeting. I don't need to be everywhere." ~ Chris*



*"I'm more planful. I always have a Plan B. If I'm not well enough to go somewhere, I don't go. I know now that it will just make it worse if I force myself." ~ Deanna*

Believe it or not, a little stress is good – it helps us work harder, try new things, follow our dreams. But too much stress is not good at all. People don't actually get used to high levels of stress but they can come to feel that what they are experiencing is just the way things are – can't do anything about it. Alternatively, some people become frozen – not knowing which way to turn. Others express their discomfort by biting people's heads off and being generally crabby. What to do? Obviously, there will be stresses that, for the moment, are unavoidable – but are they unavoidable in the long term? Are there ways you can get yourself out of stressful situations if you took it one step at a time? One place to start may be to list the stressful events or situations you *could* avoid – if you planned in advance.



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## ***Emotional safety***

Let's look at two aspects of emotional safety; your own feelings and your relationships.

### **Your own feelings**

People with depression are overwhelmed with emotions they feel they have no control over. This is frightening. Something that is part of you is out of control. Under normal circumstances, when emotions overwhelm, people move into self-soothing mode. They may seek out a shoulder to cry on, take many deep breaths and calm down, tell themselves that this too shall pass – whatever pattern has worked for them before. Depression does not respond to these methods. Something else is needed and there are two approaches that research has shown to work: medication and talk therapy (the cognitive behavioural therapy mentioned before that connects the dots between your thoughts, feelings and behaviours). Going to a doctor, getting a diagnosis and beginning a treatment plan is a rather large first step but it is the beginning of your journey to recovery. Maybe the place to begin is – just make an appointment.

**A special word about the role of medication:** The stigma around mental illness can mean that people feel that taking medication is being weak. Perhaps thinking of it as a way to regain control over your out-of-control emotions will help you understand why, at this time, you need help and there's no shame in that. However, it is necessary to educate yourself about side effects.



*“(The side effects) were not something I realized or that a doctor ever discussed with me. If I'd been better informed about the side effects or if the doctors monitored them, then maybe something could have been adjusted. Talking to the doctor about these things is so important.” ~ Anne*

Another difficult aspect of medication is the time it takes to find the right one for you.



*“I've had six major depressive episodes and each time, it has been a different medication that has worked for me. It has been a long journey of trial and error when it comes to medication.” ~ Heather*



As your mood lifts, you may be able to work with your doctor to reduce your dosage and return to your standard self-soothing techniques (or the self-soothing techniques you've worked hard to develop). But, as a caution, do not discontinue medication suddenly as your body will react in ways that could plunge you back into depression. As with everything, take it one step at a time and let your body adjust – while you closely monitor how you are feeling. If your emotions once more start to feel uncontrollable, it's too soon to taper off. Then again, you may be one of the people who will need medication in the long term. Never mind. You are on the road to recovery and, while you are understandably impatient, no one can rush the process.

### Your relationships

Human relationships are a minefield of emotions, some are positive others are not. Are there people in your life who drag you down? People who are judgmental? Argumentative? Angry? Needy? Demanding? – or just a pain to be with. If some of these relationships could be called “acquaintances,” then there is not much lost by avoiding negative people that are not that close to you. The hard part is if these are people who are important to you – family members, long-term friends, co-workers, your spouse or children. One first step is to simply name those relationships that are healthy and supportive – and those that are not. A second step is to ask yourself, “How am I participating in the unhealthy parts of this relationship?” This is a hard question because it is not uncommon for people to have become stuck with feelings of victimization – *they* are doing this to *me*. But relationships, by definition, are two-way streets. While we spend a lot of time trying to change other people, the painful truth is that the only person you can change is you. Take a look at what you can do to encourage more health in the relationships that trouble you.



*“My family wasn’t helpful. I admit I always stirred the pot in my family just to make sure they knew I was there. I’m not close with my surviving siblings and there’s one sister I don’t even talk to. We’ve all been, from time to time, the cause of interrupting and interfering with our ability to have relationships with one another. I would have chosen another family if I could have, without hesitation.” ~ John L.*





*“Some people have grown up in unloving and hurtful homes where there was alcohol or rage – or both. I think these early wounds fuel depression, so it’s not just biochemical.” ~ Chris*

**A word about abusive relationships:** There is an important exception here and that is unhealthy relationships that are abusive and violent. In such instances, it is not uncommon for people to make judgmental statements. “Why don’t you just leave? Who would put up with that?” There are many reasons why people who are being abused don’t “just leave,” one of which is that it is just too big a step to take. So, counsellors who help people in abusive relationships start with a smaller step. They ask that you create a plan to keep yourself (and possibly your children) safe.

### ***The value of supportive relationships***

Interviewees stressed the contribution that supportive people made to helping them see something was wrong, supporting them through their healing and finally, helping them maintain their wellness.



*“When I am well, I give permission to my close friends and family to ‘force’ their way in to check in with me during a depression. Their presence gives me hope to hang on.” ~ Heather*



*“My support system is wonderful. I can’t imagine what it is like for someone to go through what I have and be completely alone. Even when I don’t have the perception of wellness, I have an abundance of people around me – from formal to informal support – to help. Taking their advice is not always easy but I try to remain open and receptive. I do what I’ve been advised to do even if I don’t think it will help at the time. Looking back, I can see that it was helpful.” ~ Lori*



*“My parents were amazing, they didn’t know what to do but they were supportive.” ~ Nancy*





*"It's good to have a girlfriend – or partner or sister. Someone to talk to, to have an outlet for my thoughts and feelings. A sounding board." ~ Lucy*



*"My wife has been my advocate. She's been there when I can't be." ~ John S.*



*"There is one person that I worked with to start the Hard of Hearing Society and we remain best friends today. We talk man-talk – the things you don't tell women although I've had some very good female friends. They open up more than men." ~ John L.*

Letting people in, at your most difficult time, can be hard. We are adults. We can handle things on our own. And if we can't – what does that say about us? But everyone needs support from time to time and not to ask for help when it is needed – or to accept it when it is offered – is not a sign of strength but a sign that we are stubborn; brave, to be sure, but stubborn too.



*"I was willfully blind about my own actions, but I was happy to give advice to anyone else!" ~ Deanna*

The bottom line is that you would reach out to a friend or family member who was in need, so a place to start may be to try to trust the motivations of people when they reach out to you.

### ***Emotional time bombs***

When we are unaware of our emotions or when we are actively taught to ignore them, they don't just go away because we're pretending we aren't feeling what we are feeling. Out of sight, out of mind is not a rule that emotions follow. When emotions are suppressed, they actually gain power – sort of like putting a lid on a boiling cauldron. Sadness becomes despair. Anger becomes rage. And loss becomes inconsolable grief. If you have a history of pushing your emotions aside, you are undoubtedly carrying around emotional baggage – with a time bomb packed inside.



Therapy can help you recognize these time bombs and defuse them. The key here is what therapists call pacing. This means that you should not be encouraged nor should you push yourself to tackle these bombs too quickly. You need to build your strength and as you become healthier, the hidden stores of despair, rage and grief will slowly begin to release themselves – a bit at a time. Emotional healing cannot be hurried. It comes at its own pace and according to its own rules. The first step here is to ask yourself – what feelings have I got stored away?



*“Frequency of contact with my professionals is absolutely necessary. Without this, I could slide easily. Mind you, any more contact than I have would be too much. It is so painful to work through things.” ~ Deanna*

## Spiritual health

Spirituality is most often interpreted as being religious and, for many, religious beliefs have sustained them through good times and bad. But many people who are not religious are, in fact, spiritual. So spirituality can be defined much more broadly.



*“I am not a religious person although I know it works for some people. But that’s not for me. But I have to know who I am and where I’m going. I had a friend ask if I had a mission statement. I didn’t. Who does? But it’s been helpful to me. I write out who I am, where I’m going and how I’m going to get there. It sounds hokey but it keeps me focused.” ~ John S.*



*“Spirituality is very important to me. The love of God – not the condemnation of an angry God but the sort of God that loves. That is what Jesus is all about as I understand the New Testament.” ~ Chris*





*"I am not religious but I am deeply spiritual. In Japan, I was drawn to Buddhism and when I returned, I just clicked with First Nations spiritualism. I now have my own talking stick and feather. I was always drawn to photos of what we called Indians and Eskimos when I was in elementary school. There was a sense of difference in me so I sought out people who were different as well. I also have a sense of my own mortality and the journey my spirit will eventually take." ~ John L.*

The general question, "What feeds your soul?" can have many answers. Perhaps it is as simple as reading a wonderful book or getting up early to see the sunrise. It can be music, art, being inspired by a quote, or a love of nature. It can be anything, really, that nourishes your spirit.

### ***Healing your spirit***

In the depths of depression, your spirit can feel pretty damaged. Sometimes people use the phrase, "My spirit is broken" to describe their hopelessness because it is commonly believed that broken spirits stay broken forever. But your spirit, like your mind and body, can heal.

### ***Are you worthy of some kindness?***

By definition, healing your spirit means doing something kind – just for yourself. The trouble arises when people don't feel they are worthy of *any* kindness. If you are stuck there, the first step may be to list all the ways you are unworthy of kindness. This may seem like an odd thing to do but, typically, people have an argument going on inside of them. One side says they are not worth anything. The other side says, wait a minute – that's an unfair judgment. Sometimes, release from this ongoing back and forth dialogue comes through firmly taking one side or the other. In this case, taking the "I'm not worthy of anything" side of the debate gives these feelings a thorough airing – their time in the sun, so to speak. And there is nothing like sunshine to expose the cracks in your argument. Maybe, just maybe, you are worthy of some kindness. And who better than you to take the next step and find just one idea to answer the question, what feeds my soul?



## Belonging

Humans are social animals. We need each other. Throughout history, societies have punished those they disapprove of by excluding them, sometimes by literally driving them from their community or ghettoizing them in designated spaces. Anyone who's attended high school has memories of the power of those who were "in" versus those who were "out" – anyone who, for a variety of not particularly well defined reasons, was labelled as different. The experience of being excluded can be enormously painful because we all want to belong – somewhere.

### *The harm of stigma*

There are two important aspects of belonging that are particular to the experience of depression. First, our society stigmatizes mental illness and people with depression can feel judged and excluded. They may also actually believe they deserve these negative assessments and begin to feel that bad treatment from others is exactly what they deserve. A second aspect is that people with depression tend to withdraw and exclude themselves from the company of others while they struggle to deal with their pain and sorrow. So, belonging – from the point of view of people with depression, can be a hefty topic.

### *Hurts from the past*

Some people have never felt that they belonged anywhere. They may have experienced numerous changes and disruptions during their childhood. They may have been labelled different and bullied in school. It is possible that the people who were supposed to care for them abused them and taught them that they weren't worth anything. People, in general, have become dangerous because experience, being the good teacher that it is, has taught them that everyone is cruel and rejecting. While this is entirely understandable, what is really cruel is that people with these difficult experiences still want desperately to belong – they just can't find a way.



Other people used to belong – somewhere – and they remember what it was like to be among people who understand them, have common views and who are there for them in rough times. However, the experience of depression may have caused them to drop these contacts (possibly in ways that burned a lot of bridges) and they now need a way back – or a new place to belong given the person they are becoming.



*“If I could start all over, I’d have been an Aboriginal. I’d fit in.” ~ John L.*

### ***Too much too soon***

This is the place where you are usually advised to get out and join a club, mingle with people, volunteer, go to church (if that’s your thing) or play a sport. But people with depression and even those in recovery feel fragile – as would anyone emerging from an illness. They are not – at the moment anyway – perky people. For those who’ve had difficult life experiences and view people as hurtful, the above list of suggestions is going to seem hopelessly difficult, not to mention just another avenue for being judged and excluded. However, there is self-help as a starting point.

### ***Self- help***

There are places where everyone feels just like you, places where you can be understood and where the welcome message is, “You are not alone.” These are self-help groups. In self-help groups, no one is an expert and everyone has something to give. Members learn from one another’s experiences. There is just no substitute for being among peers who’ve “been there.” So a good first step to take towards finding a place to belong may be to investigate self-help groups in your area. Another, perhaps less daunting first step may be to join an online forum. Here is one source: [www.mooddisorderscanada.ca/forum](http://www.mooddisorderscanada.ca/forum)

Healing occurs among one’s peers because there is space to be yourself and speak your mind. As you grow stronger, you may indeed join a club, volunteer or just get out more. Among other things, self-help groups can provide a sort of launching pad for your return to the wider world. For people who never felt they belonged anywhere, a self-help group may be the first place where they feel understood.





*“Peer support is very important to me. Friends, family, colleagues will tell me, ‘It will get better’ but equally important is the frequency of contact with peers. Peers, friends and family can coerce me into having contact and can encourage me to do good things for myself like exercise.” ~ Heather*



*“Having other people to talk to who knew what I was going through helped me understand I wasn’t alone. It’s people helping each other, not working in isolation.” ~ John S.*



*“The slogan of our centre is ‘we’re better when we’re together’ and that is really true. When you are depressed it is easy to feel like you are all alone and the whole world is against you. Activity centres give you a place to go, a routine to follow if you want it and people who are welcoming you every time you show up.” ~ Anne*

## Finding your purpose

What were you put on this planet to do? Side-stepping the debate as to whether or not there is a supreme being guiding your life, the question – why are you here? – can only lead to some valuable introspection. One of the symptoms of depression is feeling worthless and this can lead to thoughts like, “The world would be a better place without me.” When you are this low, you don’t feel that your life has a purpose at all – and it hurts.

### *Feeling useful feels good*

Feeling useless feels bad. If we follow that logic, then the opposite must also be true. Feeling useful must feel good.



*“I began to volunteer for Meals on Wheels. I was doing something for someone else and that stopped me from feeling guilty and ashamed of my illness. I was thinking of someone other than myself.” ~ John S.*





*“Giving back is important. I made it through and other people can too. I promised myself that when I was better, I would give back, advocate, and tell my story, whatever helps.” ~ Deanna*

### ***It takes time***

Finding your purpose will take time and experimentation. It is rare for someone to get it right on the first try although you do hear stories that begin with, “I knew what I wanted to do since I was six years old.” Most of us struggle with finding our purpose and one of the steps along the way is rack up life experiences that – for sure – were NOT related to what your true purpose might be.

When people have had real, life altering challenges – and experiencing depression fits easily into this category – they often emerge with a sense that they want to do something to help others avoid what they’ve just been through. They call this giving back. In fact, surviving depression leads directly to the question – why? Why you? So a place to begin might be to ask yourself what have I been put on this planet to do? Finding the answer to that question will certainly be an ongoing journey but a place to begin is to ask yourself the question in the first place.

## **Knowing the signs of relapse – and taking action**

People who’ve been through a depression are sometimes angry with themselves that they didn’t recognize the signs earlier.



*“I was not helpful to myself by not seeking help earlier.” ~ John L.*



*“Now, I admire people who are able to catch things earlier. I know better now. I’m not invincible.” ~ Deanna*

This most difficult journey teaches people to be watchful, not in an obsessive, frightened way, but in a self-aware and informed manner. Not enough sleep – not a good thing. Loss of interest in things that normally excite you – another sign.





*"I ask those who know and understand what I've been through to monitor me. If I don't return a couple of phone calls or I'm not answering my email, I have asked them to bring this to my attention and ask me directly how I'm doing. I also do a lot of self-monitoring. Am I sleeping well, reaching out to friends, getting out, exercising and taking vitamin D? These are important elements to my daily life." ~ Nancy*



*"When I start to think and react negatively, I realize I am under stress and it's time to consciously do something for myself." ~ Anne*



*"If I am careless for even one day, I will feel it. For example, I know I need eight hours of sleep at night. I may be able to handle one night of poor sleep but not two. I will start to feel the distinct effects and symptoms. For me, it's about vigilance and a commitment to monitoring the things I know I need to look after. No one else is going to do it for me. Also, I am very interested in numbers and statistics. I take a depression questionnaire every time I visit my counsellor. I plot my scores over time and when I look back, the data shows me the times when my mood plateaus, time when it improves and times when it deteriorates." ~ Heather*

Interviewees were adamant that failing to take action when the signs are small and manageable is a recipe for disaster. They now know what to look for and what needs to be done, so they do it.



*"Don't wait until it's upon you full blast." ~ Chris*



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## Your role in your relationships with professional caregivers

Interviewees had specific advice regarding how best to participate in the professional-patient partnership. Not surprisingly, they recommend an active role. Their approaches vary – but each supports full partnership in their own recovery.

### *Do your own research and ask questions*



*“I want to be an empowered partner in my own wellness. My present doctor is excellent. If he gives me a new drug, he knows I’ll go to the internet and research it and he’s not intimidated by that. He knows I need to know what I’m taking and I need to ask questions.” ~ John S.*



*“I take my medication. I go to my appointments. I stay fully informed about the latest research – with what the psychiatrists are talking about.” ~ Lori*

### *Engage fully*



*“I never missed an appointment with my psychiatrist in the (outpatient) program. If I was feeling bad, I’d have someone drive me. I was hungry to heal. I fully engaged in all the support I was given and the advice that was provide. After all, they are the specialists. It’s not the time to take a stand. It’s the time to take the hand that is being held out to you.” ~ Nancy*



*“There is no point in sitting there for a half hour every week – or month – and thinking that’s all that’s needed to make you better. You have to do the work.” ~ Anne*



***Do those exercises even if they feel hokey***

*“People have to get over the idea that self-care exercises – you know, doing satisfaction scales or doing a cost/benefit analysis of your activities – those sorts of things are hokey. It sounds hokey and it can feel hokey – keeping a notebook about the good things that have happened in your day. But it works. So people have to stop worrying about what other people think. Get over it and just do it.” ~ Anne*

***Go back to your doctor if things aren't working***

*“I recognized that the medications were to start the healing process. Some may take a while to work. Some help and some don't. It was important that I was aware of how I was reacting and be prepared to go back and talk to my doctor.” ~ Lucy*

***Go to your appointments – even if you don't feel like it.***

*“Show up. Depression is insidious. It can convince you, and others for that matter, that you are okay and don't have to go to therapy. That you don't need to go to that appointment. Don't believe it. Go anyway and talk to your therapist about how you felt like you didn't need to go and why. Honest communication with a therapist is so important.” ~ Anne*

***Use your professional to say things you may not be able to say to friends and family***

*“I work very well with my case manager. I have tons of friends but she's an important outlet. What I say stays within the four walls of her office and she can provide clear-eyed feedback. She's also someone to whom I can say, 'This is tough,' and be heard. She's sort of a sounding board.”  
~ Lori*



***Accept that it's an illness***



*"I never understood the difference between depression as an emotion and depression as an illness. People say, 'I'm feeling depressed' and they mean that they are sad and it will go away soon. But depression, the illness, is a chemical imbalance in the brain that colours everything. The sadness and the hopelessness do not lift all by themselves." ~ David*



*"You cannot wish nor will a clinical depression to go away. You have to do the work. Medication alone won't do it. The professionals are there for a reason. It's imperative that you let them help you rebuild yourself."*

*~ Nancy*



## In conclusion

This wellness guide contains the best advice possible – advice from people who’ve “been there.” They are clear. Becoming well and staying well will challenge you in ways you never thought possible. When you’ve been through the darkness of depression, you can be forgiven if you think that just surviving this experience is enough. You need a break. The effort to get and stay well won’t give you a break but it will give you many rewards. The final question is, are you ready to start?



*“I call my depression my monster, the monster that enveloped me. I need to keep the monster at bay. So I remain very aware of what the monster looks like. I understand that I am susceptible to relapse. My focus is keeping the monster away.” ~ Nancy*





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**Mood Disorders** Society of Canada  
La Société Pour **Les Troubles de L'Humeur** du Canada

Hope Crescent, Belleville, ON, K8P 4S2  
Tel: 613-921-5565  
[info@mdsc.ca](mailto:info@mdsc.ca)