

# Understanding Depression

A practical guide to the mood-behavior cycle and small steps that can help restore momentum.

## What depression can look like

Depression can affect mood, energy, concentration, sleep, appetite, motivation, self-worth, and interest in activities. It may feel like sadness, numbness, irritability, exhaustion, hopelessness, or disconnection.

## The depression cycle

- Low mood or stress reduces energy and motivation.
- Activities, responsibilities, and social contact begin to shrink.
- There are fewer opportunities for pleasure, mastery, connection, and accomplishment.
- Self-critical thoughts may increase, which can deepen withdrawal and low mood.

## Skills that can help

- Use “small enough to start” goals. Five minutes of action is often more useful than waiting to feel motivated.
- Schedule one activity for pleasure, one for accomplishment, and one for connection.
- Notice all-or-nothing thinking such as “If I cannot do it fully, it is not worth doing.”
- Protect sleep and wake times as much as possible.
- Practice self-compassionate language that is realistic rather than falsely positive.

## When therapy can help

Therapy can help distinguish depression from other causes of low energy or mood, address thinking and behavior patterns, improve routines and relationships, and develop a plan for recurrence prevention.

## Try this reflection

**If your energy were 10% better tomorrow, what is one small action you would be more likely to take?**

**Using this resource:** For education and skill-building only; not diagnosis, medical advice, or crisis care. If you feel overwhelmed, pause and seek appropriate professional support. In the U.S., call or text 988 for crisis support; call 911 for an immediate emergency.