**Coping with Depression**

If you think you have depression, professional treatment is always the first step. However, there are other measures you can take on your own to reduce the impact of depression symptoms in addition to therapy. Amazingly, these same steps can help you to improve your ability to manage everyday life stress and reduce factors that may be putting you at risk for future mental health struggles.

**EXERCISE.**

Exercise strengthens our body to manage the physical challenges of living. Research proves that exercise even generates feel good chemicals that can improve our mood. There are numerous ways to get active. No matter your physical condition or interest, it is easy to find an activity that is enjoyable and practical to incorporate into your daily routine. Think of activities like jogging, yoga, playing a sport or paddle boarding. Even simpler ways to get moving can make a big difference. Things like taking the stairs, riding your bike to school or even taking the dog for a walk. As a general rule, everyone should try to get at least 2.5 hours of moderate intensity exercise a week and engage in activities that both raise the heart rate and work all muscle groups.

**NUTRITION.**

Let’s talk about the importance of nutrition. Food is fuel for the mind and body. It is ideal to strive for three balanced meals per day with light snacks in between. Balanced meals include fresh fruits and vegetables; low fat dairy like milk and yogurt; lean proteins such as chicken, fish and beans; whole grains like brown rice or wheat bread and healthy fats such as avocados and nuts. Choosing fresh options versus food packaged in a box or a bag is an easy way to start making healthy food choices. In addition, making sure to drink plenty of water is important to keep your body hydrated. To calculate exactly how much you need, take your weight and divide it by two. That number is how many ounces of water you should consume daily.

**SLEEP.**

Good sleep matters. Think of yourself as a phone and sleep as it’s charger - without sleep the brain and body will eventually shut down. Teens should strive for 8-10 hours of sleep per night. It's more than adults because teens are still growing. We know it can be hard to find the time, yet there is still a lot we can do to improve our sleep. Start with creating a sleep environment that is cool, dark, quiet and relaxing – think about using window shades, ear plugs, comfortable bedding or a fan. In addition, it is important to avoid activities that can excite the brain before bed. In the hours before bed, pass on doing homework, talking to friends, checking social media or consuming foods that are heavy or spicy or drinks that contain caffeine or sugar. In addition, staying off of electronic devices like cell phones, TV, tablets and computers an hour before sleep is a good idea. So, how can someone unwind before bed? Things like taking a hot shower, reading a book or drinking a cup of caffeine free herbal tea are easy ways to get relaxed and prepare for sleep.

**OTHER HEALTH ISSUES.**

Taking care of health problems can make a big difference in how we feel emotionally. Research even indicates that many untreated conditions share strong correlations with depression, especially inflammatory diseases. Remedying your aches, pains, allergies and other aliments may be just what you need for your mood to improve.

**AVOID HARMFUL SUBSTANCES.**

It is important to realize that there are both healthy and unhealthy ways to cope with stress. Negative coping skills include activities that can feel good in the moment, but leave people feeling worse later on and potentially be dangerous. Negative coping includes things like taking drugs, drinking alcohol or engaging in high risk behavior like reckless driving or cutting.

**BE MINDFUL.**

Mindfulness is the practice of being present in the moment. When we get overwhelmed it is usually because our minds start to think about past setbacks or worry about future challenges - this kind of thinking can lead to feelings of stress and even depression. If we live in the present moment we can begin to free ourselves of those negative thoughts and feelings and be more effective in what we are trying to do at any given moment - whether it is being more present with our friends or family, school work or hobbies.

Before school, during lunch, on your commute home, in the shower or before bed think to yourself: **S.T.O.P.**

**S** - Stop what you are doing for a minute.

 **T** - Take a breath. Breathe normally and naturally and follow your breath coming in and of your nose.

 **O** - Observe your thoughts. When a thought arises, acknowledge it, sit with it and accept it. Notice any emotions that are present and name them. Research indicates just naming your emotions can have a calming effect. Then focus on your body. Any physical sensations like a racing heart, tense muscles or pain? Identify it.

 **P** - Proceed with something that will support you in the moment. Whether that is talking to a friend or just stretching your shoulders.

The old saying, "stop to smell the roses" is core to the mindfulness belief. When we mull over the past, and worry about the future, we miss all of the beautiful things that are right in front of us - the people, places and experiences that enrich our lives, validate our worth and bring meaning to the human experience.

Mindfulness is a skill to be practiced. Try it every day for a few minutes and see if you notice a difference. Go to the Erika's Lighthouse [blog](https://www.erikaslighthouse.org/blog) for more information and ideas about mindfulness.

**DO WHAT YOU LOVE.**

It sounds easy enough, but with the push and pull of school, friends, extra-curriculars and family obligations sometimes the last thing we put on our "to do" list are the things that are the most meaningful and enrich our lives. Whether it's volunteering, painting, watching your favorite movie or baking with mom - we should always prioritize the things we love.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION: EriKa’s Lighthouse (**https://www.erikaslighthouse.org)

For more information on depression, check out Parent Handbook on Childhood and Adolescent Depression. Also, don't forget to take a look at the rest of the [Teen Depression Toolbox](https://www.erikaslighthouse.org/the-toolbox) - [take the teen depression test](https://www.erikaslighthouse.org/teen-depression-test) or to access more information on [depression](https://www.erikaslighthouse.org/learn-about-depression-1), [treatment](https://www.erikaslighthouse.org/treat-depression) and how to [help someone](https://www.erikaslighthouse.org/help-someone-1) with depression.