

Hints for developing exercise plans with depressed patients

This information is intended for GPs and other health professionals. See also:

- Fact Sheet: Exercise and depression
- Steps to encourage exercise in depressed patients

Start small and make realistic goals

If the patient has been inactive, it is better to start with small goals to build a sense of confidence and mastery (e.g. a 10 min walk in the morning). Depressed patients who do not meet their exercise goals may interpret this as a 'failure' and further 'evidence' of a sense of worthlessness. Exercise goals can later be gradually increased.

Consider depression type and severity

If a patient has severe melancholic depression and is having trouble getting out of bed, very small goals (e.g. one stretch or a walk for 2 mins) should be set. For patients who are better able to function, a range of exercise options of greater intensity can be considered (e.g. swimming, yoga, weight-lifting, jogging, brisk walking for 30 minutes).

Encourage social interaction

Depressed patients who are isolated and withdrawn are likely to benefit from increased social involvement. Walking with a friend or walking group, exercise classes or team sports (where appropriate) should be encouraged. Ask the patient to nominate people they could exercise with.

Consider the patient's preferences and enjoyment

Patients will be much more likely to keep up activity if they enjoy it. Consider a wide range of activities, and ask patients to choose activities that would prefer to try or that they previously enjoyed. Being outdoors, in sunlight or in a pleasant setting may enhance mood. Patients may choose to keep it simple and stick to brisk walking.



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Dealing with symptoms of depression

In addition to symptoms of fatigue and lack of motivation, depressed patients often report anhedonia – or lack of pleasure. Remind patients that although activities may not be as enjoyable as usual at first, this will improve with time.

Maintain motivation

Patients should be encouraged to use the following strategies, which have been found to increase motivation to exercise:

- Keep a daily exercise diary
- Set an achievable exercise goal each week
- Reward oneself for meeting exercise goals each week
- Use a pedometer to count daily steps
- Write down specific short term and long term benefits of exercise important to the patient (e.g. improved mood, reduced stress/anxiety, increased energy, weight loss, improved concentration, improved sleep, improved fitness or flexibility, reduced risk of diseases)

Anticipate barriers

Discuss with the patient the “things that are likely to make it more difficult to exercise”. Assist the patient to think of and write down possible solutions for each of these.

Provide Exercise Handout 1: Exercising to beat depression: Overcoming obstacles

