When dealing with depression, it's important not to do it alone. As part of your self-care plan, you need to have a support system drawn from the caring, helpful people in your life - those family members, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and acquaintances who make it easy for you to be yourself.

If you are suffering from depression, the last thing you may want to do is socialize. But isolation can be a vicious cycle - the more you avoid contact with others, the more depressed you are likely to feel, and the more you will continue to withdraw. Building and maintaining a strong support system are vital steps in overcoming that cycle. The people you choose to include can provide encouragement and help you challenge negative thoughts.

**Benefits of a support system**

Research shows that a network of socially supportive people offers:

- **Accountability** - being accountable to someone else is a key factor in making successful lifestyle changes. Accountability should be a two-way street: in sharing your goals and progress with someone else, encourage them to share their stories with you.

- **Improved physical and emotional health.**

- **Better problem-solving skills.**

- **Enhanced "brain fitness"** - from a book club to a golf league, interacting with others helps you stay mentally sharp.
Building your support system

At first it may be hard to reach out to people and ask for help. But connecting with others is vital to your recovery. Remember: you don’t need to share the details of depression with everyone in your life. Who you choose to confide in is entirely your decision.

When building your circle of support, consider the following:

- **Who should you include?** Focus on including those people in your life who have shown they can be sympathetic and non-judgmental, and exclude those who tend to be overly critical or make you feel anxious. If you don’t currently have a strong social network, it’s **never** too late to start. Even if you start building your network just with the professionals involved in your treatment, it is important to begin to trust and share your recovery with others.

- **Which environment is best?** Some people may prefer the formal setting of a support group led by a trained professional. Others may be more comfortable sharing in an informal gathering of one or more friends.

- **Should you share with co-workers?** Each circumstance is different. Although today there is much greater awareness of depression as a treatable disease, stigma still remains about brain illnesses.

- **How can you stay engaged?** Look for opportunities to stay involved in the lives of others, through recreational, leisure or faith-based groups, volunteer opportunities, classes, or other activities you enjoy.

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U-M Depression Center  ☎ 800-475-6424  ☀ www.depressioncenter.org

Please visit the UMDC online toolkit at www.depressiontoolkit.org. This toolkit was made possible by the Friends of the University of Michigan Hospital and Health System.

Disclaimer: This document is for informational purposes only and is not intended to take the place of the care and attention of your personal physician or other professional medical services. Talk with your doctor if you have questions about individual health concerns or specific treatment options.

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Stress is a part of everyday life. Feelings of stress can have a positive influence – for example, they can motivate you to meet an important deadline or avoid a dangerous situation. However, stress often has the opposite effect, harming our emotional and physical health and limiting our ability to function.

Whether caused by an external trigger (like losing a job) or an internal trigger (like setting unrealistic expectations for yourself), your body and mind must attend to stress in order to return you to balance. This takes your energy away from other, more positive functions like concentrating or taking action. Since we are responsible for bringing about much of our own stress, however, we can also do much to reduce it.

Common signs of stress
- Feelings of anger
- Tension
- Tight muscles
- Changes in eating habits
- Changes in sleeping habits
- Inability to focus

Self-care strategies for managing stress
Many of the above signs are common to both stress and depression. That means you can use many of the same life changes and self-care strategies to ease the symptoms of depression and alleviate stress:
- Exercise regularly to burn off the energy generated by stress.
- Limit or eliminate stimulants like caffeine.
- Pace yourself through the day, and take breaks.
- Practice good sleep habits.
- Recognize the role your thoughts play in causing you stress. Challenge negative messages and unrealistic expectations you may be communicating to yourself. Practice positive self-talk to offset these counterproductive thoughts.
- Learn techniques for “reframing” situations to see their positive aspects.
- Find humor in life. Laughter is a great tension-reducer.
- Seek the support of friends and family.
- Explore different techniques to find those most effective at helping you relax your mind and body, such as abdominal breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, visual imagery, or mindfulness.
Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress, but it can become a problem when it results in obsessive thoughts, excessive worrying, or uncontrollable fears about everyday events. Very often, people who experience anxiety also have depression – this is true in approximately 75% of people who have one or the other. Similar to depression, inherited characteristics, brain chemistry, and environmental factors, such as stressful life events, may all play a role in bringing about an episode of anxiety. Anxiety can be treated successfully through medication, specific types of psychotherapy, or both.

**Major types of anxiety disorders include:**

- **Panic Disorder** is characterized by unexpected, repeated episodes of intense fear, accompanied by physical symptoms such as a rapid heart rate, dizziness, or sweating.
- **Social Phobia, or Social Anxiety Disorder**, is characterized by intense, persistent anxiety and self-consciousness that arise in everyday social situations, or even just in anticipating those situations.
- **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)** is characterized by recurrent, intrusive thoughts (obsessions) and/or the compulsion to engage in certain repetitive behaviors or rituals.
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** can develop after a terrifying ordeal that involved real or threatened physical harm.
- **Specific Phobia** refers to a fear of specific objects or situations, and the distress when encountering those objects or situations. The primary symptom of phobia is **avoidance**.
- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)** involves chronic, excessive worrying about everyday matters. People with GAD often have fatigue, restlessness, insomnia, irritability, and poor concentration.

University of Michigan researchers are actively studying anxiety disorders to understand their causes and interactions with other illnesses. With early diagnosis and early treatment, it is possible that anxiety disorders may be better controlled and less likely to contribute to depression later in life.