

Pandemic Depression?©
Twenty-Five Come Alive!
25 + Ways to Treat Your Own Depression

Lois A. Dodds, M.A., M.A., Ph.D., L.P.C.
Board Certified Counselor (N.B.C.C.)
Certified Trauma & CISD Specialist
Heartstream Resources for Global Workers

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About the Author

Dr. Lois Dodds is a developmental psychologist and counselor, specializing in the care of cross-cultural humanitarian workers. In 1992 she co-founded Heartstream Resources for Global Workers, along with her husband, the late Lawrence E. Dodds, M.D., M.P.H. Heartstream was one of the first organizations created to provide multi-disciplinary care for international workers.

Dr. Dodds has taught graduate students from 100 nations in about 50 countries. She is author of fifteen books and more than 150 published articles and poems, plus two series of videos. She regularly presents at professional conferences. She co-authored a three volume textbook series, *Global Servants*, with Dr. Laura Mae Gardner. She completed doctoral studies at UCSB.

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Pandemic Depression???

Twenty-Five Come Alive! 25 + Ways to Treat Your Own Depression©

By Dr. Lois A. Dodds
Heartstream Resources
www.heartstreamresources.org

Depressed? Of course! Without a doubt this year of the pandemic and all its “shut in” realities can make any of us depressed! It is a normal and common response to the distressing events in our world right now. *If you are a sensitive and caring person, to feel depressed right now is normal! To **not** feel depressed and saddened is the abnormal response!* We could say that depression is a to-be-expected outcome of facing so much death and uncertainty, rather than being a disease.¹

Even in usual life without a pandemic most people experience one or more periods of depression at some point. We know certain life situations are more likely to lead to depression. These can include major life changes, such as post-partum hormonal shifts in the body and brain. Others include being displaced, as a refugee or when one moves to another country or culture. Relationship losses lead to depression, as do loss of dreams and unfulfilled expectations. These are all exponentially up with this pandemic!

This article is about how to heal yourself! Depression is a natural part of the ebb and flow of life; modern perspectives on mental health have made people more aware of it. Medical practitioners began decades ago to treat it as a disease, rather than seeing it as the temporary state that it is for most people. Though one does not want to ignore the symptoms of depression simply on the hope that it will go away, one can do a great deal to promote self-healing. Acknowledging depression early and beginning a regimen of self-care can prevent it from becoming entrenched.

Most depression will heal itself in about six months. When it is prolonged or very severe it is helpful to have professional resources for recovery. The practices described here will help most people most of the time. You can use them every day to boost your mood and not get stuck.

¹ Various recent books trace the history of how this “normal” response got turned into a “disease.”

What Have I learned?

As a life-long melancholy person, prone-to-depression myself, I have learned much about how it “comes on” and how to resist it and to overcome it. Growing up, I seemed to have a deep and endless pool of sadness within me. That stayed with me into middle adulthood. Many “adverse child events” (ACE) filled my life. We moved many times due to my father’s whims when he would come home from the sea after another round of service in the Merchant Marines. Though I did not know it as a child, I learned later one grandfather had committed suicide; the other became alcoholic after the death at an early age of my grandmother, leaving him with five children to rear. I never knew any of my grandparents or extended family, having met only one sister of each of my parents. Gradually I learned enough family history to discover patterns of suicide, depression, and addictions on both sides. These patterns have continued in my family of origin, with addiction a problem for most of my fifteen siblings and 65 nieces and nephews of the next generation, plus the next generation of 100 or so after that—my grandchildren’s generation.

As a silent, almost mute, child in a big and noisy family I started to learn early about depression. I learned much from my mother, who had every human reason to be depressed, losing one husband to sudden death, having fourteen pregnancies, and living with the multitude of uncertainties brought about by having married my father. Yet, most of the time she rose above those human reasons through her faith in God.

For me, depression was paradoxical. Though I experienced it often I also learned how to recognize its appearance and to how to stymie it, so it would not take over my life. I acknowledged it but discovered I did not have to live by it, or to live it out.

Thinking about that recently in my work as a counselor, I decided to list what kept me, to identify things I had learned. Here are 25+ habits I started learning early in life which kept depression from consuming me. These have all been validated in my own life, and in recent years with multiple research studies. They are multi-dimensional, just as are the negative patterns we might naturally choose to follow. In combatting depression, what we do to help in one area of life, such as the physical, also bears fruit in the other domains, such as cognitive. Together they form an integrated schema for helping ourselves. As one of my peer readers pointed out, they also help us reject lies and build us up in our social/relational circles.

What Can These 25+ Do for You?

This is what one of my clients told me, after I shared my first version of this list:

“These 25+ things form a framework for my day! They give me specific things to do so I have something to think about besides how badly I feel. They keep me engaged in thinking and behaving in overcoming my depression, not succumbing to it.” She says they gave her a new

way to see that reality was bigger than her own painful feelings--how depressed she felt. Perhaps they can do that for you too, right now, during this pandemic!

Five Dimensions of Your Development Affected by Depression

These 25+ practices affect five very crucial dimensions of your being. As a developmental psychologist I marvel at how these practices, even those I learned very early, are so sound and so universally health-producing. They are the common-sense means of self-care built into us by our Creator, relating to five dimensions of our well-being. God built into us, at creation, what our bodies, minds, and spirits need to heal themselves.

- Spiritual
- Physical
- Actualizing (your potential, especially cognitive and talents)
- Relational/Social
- Emotional

At Heartstream² we say “SPARE Yourself”³ as a reminder to care for ourselves in all these dimensions of growth and health. I believe the foundation starts with the spiritual practices and habits we can change to help ourselves. Those move us into the physical and physiological.

Spiritual:

1. **Meditate on God.** Even reading one of the praise and thanksgiving Psalms can boost your degree of gratitude and remind you of God’s creation and love. It can also enable you to see that God created every emotion, and that we do not have to hide ours from Him; He always understands. Even five minutes can set the tone of your day. Longer time reading, meditating and reflecting is even more helpful! You can also encounter God in the Bible or in other ways, especially in nature. Connected to Him, you feel less alone.
2. **Tell God** you accept His strength, His power, His wisdom for your day. Remind Him of His promise that He gives us “love, power, and a sound mind” and that the “spirit of fear” is from the enemy of our souls. (This principle, learned and practiced in AA has proven powerful and lasting.)
3. **Listen to Music to boost your mood!** Comforting, encouraging, uplifting lyrics and many types of instrumental music can help you. Lyrical, gentle music, choral or instrumental, is especially helpful, such as some worship music. Chant is very healing. Heavy beats, however, can make you feel fragmented and anxious.

1 See www.heartstreamresources.org for a description of this organization devoted to Global Workers.

2 The page describing SPARE Yourself is appended to this document.

4. **Pray.** Even if you don't know if God hears you, expressing what your struggles are and what you need is good for "mental health." Praying for others takes the focus off yourself. There are now books full of research studies that show the power of prayer by you and for you.

Physical/physiological:

5. **Sunlight! Let the light in and get out in the light!** Open your curtains and blinds and expose yourself to a maximum amount of light, immediately upon arising. Even your skin absorbs light. Light therapy is proven to help your whole sense of well-being. A full-spectrum light lamp in addition to real sunlight, is very helpful during winter and gloomy days, especially if you are prone to Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

6. **Get up early and get dressed immediately.** Put on nice clothing and comb your hair. Make-up too can help you look more cheerful. How you see yourself, what you see when you look in the mirror, has an impact on you for the whole day. It is worth looking your best for yourself!

7. **Make your bed.** That creates a sense of order and being ready to face the day. Plus, it is cozier to climb in at the end of the day when you "turn your bed back" in preparation for sleep. You feel more cared for, the way you do in a nice hotel or when someone you loved put you to bed.

8. **Have a "cuppa"** as my Kiwi friends say—a warm cup of coffee, tea, milk, or whatever you enjoy. Make it a morning ritual while you take a few minutes to get awake, before your usual breakfast. Before bedtime it helps too.

9. **Walk! Getting outside** your home or apartment is helpful. Getting out in **nature doubles the benefit!** Anything that gets you moving helps both brain and body, as well as your spirit.

10. **Eat Color! Colorful and nutritious food!** Take time to prepare aromatic, fragrant, beautiful food. It is therapeutic to create something, in addition to seeing the foods themselves. Eating food of every color is the easiest "meal plan" and insures you have a wide range of nutrients. What goes through your mouth is what builds your body, as your food holds the building blocks of your new self—your new cells! If you are made of Twinkies, you court depression!

11. **Sleep.** Plan for how you can get best sleep at night. Turn off the television, phone, and other electronics two hours before bed time. Read or listen to music instead of getting hyped up before sleep. If you can't sleep get up and do something useful or read something boring or soothing. Get up at the same time each day. Don't get in the habit of "sleeping in" as your sleep rhythm is distorted. This is a big challenge for those of us who do much international travel, as we have to constantly re-set our circadian rhythm. It's a challenge during these "work from home" days too when it is tempting to stay in PJs all day.

12. **Plant something** or cultivate a potted plant. A green leaf, a colorful blossom (color!) boosts your mood.

Actualizing your potential and cognition:

13. **Bring color into your life**—even flowers from the lawn or a colorful shopping bag can help. Wear color too. It does not cost any more than dressing drably, and it can raise your mood. As my artist colleague Alan says, color your life with all the colors in your Crayon box—don't limit yourself to the charcoal sketching stick!
14. **Be neat.** Keep your personal space in order. Beautify it when you can. This helps your state of mind. Sloppiness and sloth reinforce depression and lead to a sense of not coping.
15. **Write.** This takes something from inside of you and puts it outside. You might write down what you are feeling and find a pattern in it. Write a poem. Write a journal. Write a friend an encouraging note.
16. **Think differently!** Cognitive restructuring is a fancy way of saying, “Stop! Stop the negative self-talk and change it to positive!” See a situation differently by looking from a different angle. For example, if you think, “Oh, no! It's raining again so I will have a miserable day!” change your thought from pessimistic to optimistic and say out loud: “The rain will make everything grow and it can feel cozy inside on a rainy day.”
17. **Get new frames! Re-frame your view.** This is a way to see something differently. For example, is it raining when you plan to hike? A black frame makes that picture look gloomy. A white frame shows you sitting in a nice gazebo in the forest watching the mist and letting the rain soothe you.
18. **Look up to someone!** A person ahead of you on life's journey who exemplifies wisdom and stability, joy and tranquility can increase your sense of worth and give you hope for a future. This practice has been shown to increase the likelihood of life success in children who grew up deprived or abused. It is a powerful antidote to depression and despair!

Relational and Social:

19. **ACT UP! How you feel is not the whole of reality.** If you behave “down” because you feel depressed, you will become more depressed. ACT “up” (behave better than what your emotions are saying) without being self-centered and you will feel better. The better feeling follows the decision to enact more positive behavior.
20. **Do something nice or helpful for someone else,** even when you don't feel like it. This changes your perspective! The very act of accomplishing something nice for someone else gives you a feeling of coping and lends a new perspective. Sometimes we receive back appreciation, a bonus which adds an extra level in boosting our mood. Keep helping even if you don't get thanked!
21. **Connect with people you love, as well as with people who love you.** During the pandemic this is a challenge! Yet, find ways with phones and screens. Talk! Talking to and time with people who love you unconditionally is always enriching, building hope and life into you. In

these times when you are alone so much, reach out to others who need a smile, a “virtual touch,” a kind deed. Time with others can break the cycle of morose introspection which usually accompanies depression. Even a three-minute phone call or writing a note to someone cheers you up; it gets you out of yourself!

22. **Talk to a friend** about how you are feeling. This gets your feeling outside your own head and self and makes it easier to examine them and to identify distortions.
23. **Laugh.** Even if you don’t feel like it, read funny stuff and watch a funny film with someone you love. Laughter can cure disease, including depression.⁴
24. **Look at photos of people you love.** Recent research show this too is very effective!
25. **Join a virtual group.** This connects you to others. A choir or other music group is great, as both singing and playing are therapeutic, even with the challenges of Zoom or Skype. Music therapy can be self-administered! Even an online play group with kids is uplifting!
26. **Give a “gentle answer”** when anyone is upset with you. That defuses and diffuses conflict and hard feelings, thus fending off depression. Don’t ruminate on it.⁵

Emotional:

27. **Talk to yourself!** This is an age-old remedy for pain, negative thinking, and difficult relationships. See the Psalms for examples of powerful self-talk. King David was a pro at it!

You will recognize that many of these habits and practices span more than one dimension of your being. These, for example:

(4.) **Pray some more!** Of course, praying is highly emotional, expressing your thoughts, needs, desires to God and then listening to Him. I love the ancient passage that describes God’s care for His people, “In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them.”⁶

(16.) **Laugh some more!** (Yes, here it is again!) Even if you don’t feel like it, read funny stuff and watch a funny film with someone you love—or even by yourself. Laughter can cure disease, including depression. Norman Cousins laid the groundwork for our understanding of the power of laughter to cure illness with his landmark book on cancer.⁷

(20.) **Connect with someone you love.** (I am repeating this one too!) If you are actually alone, reach out to others who need a smile, a word, a kind deed. Connection time with others can break the cycle of morose introspection which usually accompanies depression. Even a three-minute phone call or writing a note to someone cheers you up; it gets you out of yourself!

⁴ See the work of Norman Cousins, cited in the references.

⁵ An old Jewish proverb says, “A gentle answer turns away wrath.” Proverbs 15:1 NIV

⁶ Isaiah 63:9, NIV

⁷ Norman Cousins, *The anatomy of an illness*.

So What? Does This *REALLY* Work?

Permit me to give you one more example. When I had just begun my doctoral research at University of Southern California in Santa Barbara, two dreadful things happened. I was catapulted out of the job I loved! I say catapulted because it was sudden and unexpected, and downright unexplainable, as it was a total violation of all the values of the organization. I had been invited to become director of the program I loved. I had declined, as I treasured and preferred my role as teacher and counselor. The person then appointed to the job I had been offered immediately ejected me from the staff. I heard myself wailing before I could fully comprehend the letter I held in my hand. This crisis sent me into PTSD. I lost total faith in myself as a teacher and a counselor and in the organization I loved. My husband's and children's belief in me was comforting, but I could not believe I would ever be effective again.

The second thing that happened to precipitate the sudden onset of my major depression was the birth of my first grandchild. She was born to my youngest son. I was in the rainforest of Peru when I got the exciting call about her birth in Vienna. I was thrilled! Then moments later, it was as if a bell rang in my head and a voice said, "Okay, Lois, now you must face the realities of your own childhood. You can no longer bury them in the busyness and joys of motherhood. Your youngest child now has a child—proof enough that your children are grown and thus you must no longer bury those old experiences. Now, you must come to terms with them."

During the two years of doing my qualitative anthropological research, I faced a daily dilemma. I awakened each day with the profound desire to pull the covers over my head and to never get up. My sense was that I was lost in a cave so vast there was no way out—no glimmer of light to lead me out. I was in pitch blackness, so I dared not move lest I fall off a precipice to my death. It was freezing cold, and I literally shivered. I knew that somehow outside the cave was my current life—beautiful and full, yet I was cut off from it.

My daily dialogue with God at that point went something like this. "Oh my God! My God! (not swear, but prayer!) I don't want to get up. I can't face this day. I want to just disappear. But...., you have given me this opportunity to do research to see what a difference your presence in a person's life makes....I want to do it; I want to learn. I don't want to miss this chance....Please, Lord, give me your energy. Give me your strength. Help me to get up. Help me to make this day count. I take your strength, Lord, because you said (Remember, *you* said it!), "My strength is made perfect in your weakness." Well, I am going to choose to believe you, so I am taking your strength....⁸

Then, I dragged myself out of bed and dressed myself (albeit being in my "dissertative state"⁹ I inadvertently put some things on inside out or backwards!) I would get started for the day with the habits I list above. I would settle down to work and be amazed at the end of the day. I did it! Another amazing discovery was that my work itself—the three-day interviews and hearing them

⁸ II Cor. 12:9 NIV

⁹ I used this term in the appendix to my dissertation as a light-hearted way to describe what so many of us experienced. One can become so focused on the work that ordinary matters are done so routinely as to not be noticed. It is sort of the "absent minded professor" syndrome!

over and over and having them flow out of my fingertips by transcribing them word-for-word—imparted energy for each day. In them, I saw the direct fruit of the power and energy of Spirit of God at work in people’s lives—in my life! It was paradoxical, studying the power of God during my own profound weakness.¹⁰

When I finished my dissertation in the two years expected for completion, my depression lifted. It was a mysterious experience, the sudden onset precipitated by human factors and the sudden recovery made possible by the energy of God’s Spirit.

Remember my early life? I had discovered early that Jesus as friend was “there for me” to lift me up so I did not succumb to depression. From age four Jesus became my companion and most personal friend. I felt His presence and was learning truths and God’s helpful principles especially taught to me by mother. I held onto that knowledge, so I did not go “over the edge” or “round the bend,” as my Aussie friends say about deep depression.

Summary

My own life and the thousands of persons with whom I have counselled testify to the power of treating our own episodes of depression. The wisdom offered to us first in both Old and New Testament, and then verified through countless research studies, works! So much of it is common sense. It is practical. It is free. Most of these practices, which we can make habits, are ageless principles which we find in much historical literature as well as in the Bible. We don’t need to spend money or necessarily have professional intervention to get out of depression. Right now, those would be impossible for most people depressed due to the pandemic. Treating yourself may be the best option you have!

There are times we do need some outside intervention. Nowadays for most people that will come in the form of professional counselling. Even a few decades ago it more likely came through our rabbi, priest or pastor, a wise older relative, or a mature friend. As you apply these 25+ ways for “self-treatment” of depression you can speed your recovery in any present episode and strengthen yourself for any future encounters with depression. You hold great power to change your life!

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Appendix

Spare Yourself!

“**SPARE YOURSELF!**” is an easy acronym to remind us to live our lives in a way that is nurturing and healthful. These have parallels in recruitment qualifications and in training modules and goals. These can help you reflect about your own style of living; especially in another culture where it is harder to keep you balance.

S = spiritual nurture, individual and through others, worship, beauty, art, music

P = physical nurture, nourishment: sleep, nutrition, exercise, fitness, health assessments

A = actualize your God-designed self; cultivate the best, genuine YOU, discover what He designed you to contribute in His universe; discover your potential

R = relationship nurturing

E = emotional nurture, expression, pleasure, nourishment

Y = why? keeping the sense of wonder, awe, intellectual nurture, challenge

O = outlook, healthy perspectives, attitudes

U = unveil – lay down your mask and risk being the real self God created in His image

R = rest, respite, time out

S = self-esteem

E = exercise

L = learning

F = fun, pleasure

To live a healthy life, you need to keep your balance in these areas of life! Write down ways you can practice creating good health for yourself, according to these categories. Use the space with each one or write out your plan on a separate sheet.