

Sample Treatment Plan for Depression

The following plan gives you a general outline of what you can expect from counselling/therapy for depression. We won't necessarily work on all of these areas, and the nature of what we cover and order we do it in will vary from person-to-person depending on the main issues you're struggling with and what you want to get out of our work together.

Often people come to therapy as the result of a specific event or circumstance that's triggered feelings of depression. If this is the case, the first thing we do is explore strategies to help you deal with and get through your current situation and get some relief from any pain or distress it's causing you.

In addition to helping you deal with any immediate issues that are contributing to your depression, when you're depressed, there tend to be three general aspects of your life that we need to address: behaviours, thoughts and emotions. We usually work on these in the order below:

Behaviours: When you're depressed, your level of activity can decrease a great deal and you can find yourself avoiding a lot of activities you used to do, or would like to be able to do. But when you're depressed, the less you do, the worse you tend to feel. Even a small increase in your level of activity can improve your mood and start decreasing your feelings of depression. When you're depressed, if you're spending a lot of time alone, isolated from other people or not doing anything, almost anything you do is going to make you feel at least a little better.

If you are spending a lot of time avoiding things, doing very little and/or isolating yourself from other people, usually the first thing we do in therapy is:

- Figure out ways for you to gradually increase your level of activity, making sure it's not overwhelming, but ensuring you are still regularly doing things that can give you a sense of pleasure or accomplishment and are spending some time with other people.

Cognitive: When you're depressed, your thoughts tend to be overwhelmingly negative. You'll have negative thoughts about yourself, negative thoughts about the future, and negative thoughts about the world and other people (i.e. comparing yourself to others, wishing you were more like someone else, feeling the world is unfair, etc.). This negative thinking is a by-product of feeling depressed, but it also helps maintain your depression and make you feel even more depressed. Reducing negative thinking goes a long way in elevating your mood and breaking out of your depression.

- We'll work on ways for you to challenge negative thinking, to look at things from a broader perspective, and come up with other perspectives that aren't as negative.

You might also find that your mind is often racing, ruminating over your problems and your mood, dwelling on regrets or worries, etc., all of which send your mood spiralling down further.

- We'll develop strategies based on mindfulness to help you calm your mind and let go of thoughts without getting caught up in these cycles of racing thoughts, worrying and rumination.

Emotional: When you're depressed, your feelings and emotions can become overwhelming and seem unbearable. We'll work on ways for you to:

- regulate your emotions more effectively so they don't become overwhelming
- deal with emotional distress when your emotions are feeling unbearable

In addition, we may also do things like:

- Help you deal with anxiety, as depression is often accompanied by high levels of anxiety.
- Explore underlying issues and beliefs that contribute your depression, including things such as low self-esteem, lack of confidence, lack of direction in your life, perfectionism, fear of failure, lack of assertiveness, negative or traumatic events from your past, etc.
- Address any other issues you feel are important.

Length of Therapy: The number of sessions you'll find most beneficial depends on what you're currently going through in your life, your level of depression, and what you want to get out of therapy. You don't need to commit to a certain number of sessions in advance, and you can discontinue our sessions at any time (although I do require 24-hours notice to cancel a session that's already been scheduled).

4-6 Sessions: If you're feeling depressed in response to a specific situation or set of circumstances and primarily looking for strategies to improve your current mood, deal with the immediate distress you're experiencing, and get through this difficult period on as best you can and get your life back on track, 4-6 sessions might provide you with what you want to get out of therapy.

8-14 Sessions: If your depression is chronic and/or has been going on for a long time, or you're going through a period of severe depression, you might benefit from coming to therapy a little bit longer. If you're looking to bring yourself out of deep depression, make some fundamental changes to negative patterns of thinking and beliefs about yourself, learn more effective ways to tolerate your emotions, and develop strategies to prevent relapse in the future, this often takes about 8-12 sessions.

Ongoing/Occasional: You may decide to continue with therapy on a regular basis to provide ongoing support, or to occasionally return for a session or two as needed to help yourself stay on track or to get some help during a difficult time.