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# How to Keep Running With Depression, According to Experts

When everything feels like climbing Mount Everest, break down your run into small, achievable steps.

BY [SHELBY DEERING](#)

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I've been running for most of my life, logging miles almost every day. But come winter, a dark cloud takes over that very nearly squeezes that running spark out of me, turning running into a dreaded chore rather than one of my greatest sources of joy. Even lacing up my shoes feels overwhelming, let alone getting out the door or hitting the [treadmill](#).

While my type of depression is seasonal, [depression](#) can come on anytime and it's caused by a variety of factors, including biological or genetic predisposition along with significant life stressors, like traumatic experiences, grief, and relationship issues.

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Defined as a “mental health condition that negatively affects the way a person feels, thinks, and behaves,” [Megan Pietrucha, PsyD.](#), licensed clinical psychologist and sport psychologist, says that depression can look

and feel different for different people, depending on the frequency and intensity of changes in mood states.

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Diagnosable depression is characterized as an episode that lasts at least two weeks, and is marked by a loss of interest or pleasure in activities (also known as anhedonia), a lack of energy, feelings of worthlessness, restlessness, and worst of all, suicidal ideation.

If you notice any of these symptoms, it's important to seek help. Speaking with a medical professional can help you find treatment options that work for you.

## Tips for Finding Motivation to Run When You're Depressed

It's not uncommon for depressed individuals to lose their drive to run, even if they run regularly. Kevin Chapman, Ph.D., licensed psychologist, director of the Kentucky Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders, and a college sprinter, says that people with depression often experience something called low reward sensitivity, meaning that you might not be able to look forward to pleasurable, rewarding activities, like running.

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You might be thinking, "Wait—haven't I heard that running, and exercise in general, is *good* for depression?" Well, yes, it is. Many [medical studies](#) have shown that running and other forms of movement can [decrease depression symptoms](#), but what if you can't get out of bed? What if you can't muster showering or brushing your teeth? How on earth will you actually *run* if your depression symptoms are weighing on you like a wet blanket?

One way is to try your best to focus on the positive effects you may experience from running. As [Sam Maniar, Ph.D.](#), sport psychologist and founder of [Center for Peak Performance](#), points out, running can give someone a sense of control when everything else feels out of control. Seeing progress and improvement can help with feelings of accomplishment.

[Running outdoors](#) can increase serotonin, the hormone that helps regulate mood, Maniar adds. Also, especially in my case, running outside can boost exposure to sunlight, thus increasing [vitamin D](#) levels—and some experts theorize that decreased vitamin D can lead to seasonal affective disorder, specifically.

Just keep in mind that, as Maniar says, running isn't an ultimate cure when it comes to depression. "There are many reasons why someone may still be experiencing depression despite [regular exercise](#), such as overdoing it, exercising too lightly, not giving it enough time to change [mood](#), avoidance of the problem that is causing the depression, or [sleep](#) disturbance due to exercising late at night," he says. "Moreover, if

someone is severely depressed, exercise alone is unlikely to alleviate depressive symptoms.”

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Think of running and other types of [exercise](#) not as stand-alone options, but as adjunct boosts alongside tried-and-true depression treatments, such as [therapy](#) and medication, if that’s a combination that feels right to you and your doctor. If a run has the potential to make you feel *a little* better, it’s still worth it, even if feels like the last thing you want to do.

Getting from point A (your bed) to point B (the sidewalk, trail, treadmill, etc.) may seem insurmountable when you’re in the throes of depression, but if you want to make it happen, you can do so through small steps that feel more doable. I know from experience that on my worst depression days, breaking things down into easy-to-digest steps is key, even if they’re as simple as, “Sit up in bed. Place both feet on the floor,” and so on.

With the help of experts, here are the [basic steps to running](#) on days when it feels utterly impossible, including breaking everything down into achievable chunks. Keep in mind that you don’t have to do *every* step if your depression isn’t allowing for it. Or perhaps a few of these steps work for you instead of all of them. No matter how you get there, a run—even if it’s just five minutes or half a mile—is a solid goal.

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## **Steps for Getting Out for a Run When You Have Depression**

### **1. Set out your clothes the night before**

If you plan to [run in the morning](#), or really, anytime during the day, lay out your running ensemble beforehand, including your [shoes](#). Maniar says that once you see your outfit, you could be more likely to follow through with your run.

Pietrucha adds that all you have to do is start by telling yourself to get dressed and lace up your shoes—focus on that instead of the entire run ahead.

### **2. Come up with an intention**

As a popular phrase used at the beginning of [yoga classes](#) and [meditation](#) sessions, “setting an intention” can be helpful for running, too, especially if you’re feeling low. What’s your intention for your run? How do you want to feel? What do you want to achieve?

### **3. Identify barriers**

When you're depressed, the tiniest hiccups can be overwhelming. While these hurdles can't always be avoided, before your run, try to identify some [barriers](#) that might come up. For example, are you pressed for time? Is the weather not so great? Maniar advises coming up with multiple solutions to overcome each potential barrier.

For example, leave a little earlier or shorten your run to compensate for a time crunch. Bundle up and wear waterproof clothes if it's a cold, rainy day. If it's a hot day and the balmy temps are bumming you out even more, be sure to [hydrate](#) before your run and wear sweat-wicking clothing to beat the heat. Or take your workout to the [treadmill](#) for some intervals or an [easy run](#) while you listen to your favorite audiobook.

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## **4. Build connections**

Because depression is often marked by [social isolation](#) and loneliness, you can try to connect with others through running. For example, you could find a running partner. "You're more likely to [run] if you have the support of someone else and you know they are counting on you to support them," Maniar says.

## **5. Use the "10-minute rule"**

Pietrucha says that you can tell yourself that once you're dressed, after 10 minutes, if you're still not motivated, you can skip the run. Or if you're already mid-run, you can stop and turn around or just [walk](#) and try again another day. "Usually by the time you're dressed and start running, you'll find that it's not as overwhelming as it felt before you started," she says.

## **6. Choose a route**

Depression can make it difficult to land on decisions in the moment, so try to choose your [running route](#) before heading out. Chapman suggests identifying various options and selecting one. Whether it's around your neighborhood, near a local school, through a park, or on a [trail](#), think of the route that feels the best to you and seems the most doable according to the severity of your symptoms.

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## **7. Set a realistic goal**

Chapman recommends setting a realistic [goal](#) related to your running that day. Maybe you need to go for fewer miles or hit a slower pace or swap a run for a [yoga](#) session—do what feels right.

"The depressed brain will often focus on the negative or perceived failures, so keeping goals small, yet reinforcing, is crucial to building a sense of

efficacy and motivation,” Pietrucha says. “For example, planning to go for a 10-mile run right out of the gate is likely not going to go well. Instead, you might measure your workout by time versus [mileage](#) and allow yourself to walk or take breaks as you ease back into a [routine](#).”

## 8. Focus on your surroundings

While running, it can be easy to focus on how terrible you feel or how it seems like your feet are stuck in cement. Instead, Maniar advises focusing on what’s around you: the warm sunshine, beautiful [nature scenes](#), and any other sights that bring you peace.

## 9. Rate your mood

Oftentimes, before or during a therapy session, your therapist will ask you to rate your mood. Chapman says this can also be a helpful approach to apply to your running.

Before you start running, rate your mood from 1 to 10, with 1 as feeling great and 10 as severe depression symptoms. See if that number changes after you run. If the number lowers, keep that benefit in mind for motivation for your next run, too.

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## 10. Give yourself grace

“Sometimes, we just have [bad runs](#),” says Pietrucha, and this can be particularly true if you’re feeling depressed. “Not letting this deter you by not perceiving it as a failure is key to maintaining motivation. This means you are willing to give yourself grace and compassion if you didn’t meet your running goal that day.”

## 12. Reward yourself

What [motivates](#) you? What feels like a reward? What gets your competitive juices flowing? Tap into these driving forces when you’re feeling too depressed to run. Maniar says that contests, especially team contests, can really help with motivation. If you feel motivated enough, join up with a relay team, or organize one, and compete against fellow relay teams. Or see if your gym has a [challenge](#) to meet a certain amount of miles this month.

Pietrucha says that a good [playlist](#), a friend, or another reward of your choosing can get you over the hump, too.

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*If your depressive symptoms are not improving or you are having thoughts of suicide, please contact your medical provider or the National Suicide Prevention Hotline (988), call 911, or go to your local emergency room.*

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**SHELBY DEERING**

Shelby Deering is a lifestyle writer who specializes in decor, home tours, wellness, travel, vintage, and feel-good stories for national publications. She's from Madison, Wisconsin, and when she's not writing, you'll find her running local trails, shopping flea markets, or going for walks with her husband and corgi.

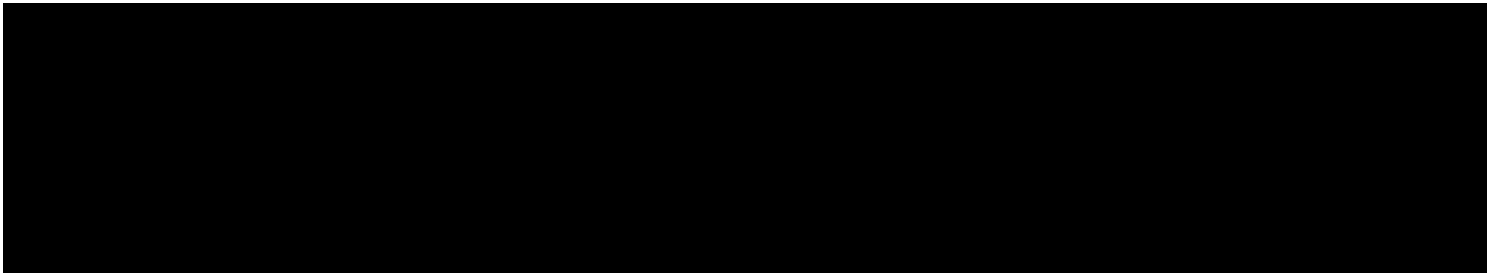
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