

Fitness > Men's Health MVP Exclusives

#Gains, Explained: How Can I Work Out When I'm Depressed?

I think I want to exercise, but I'm at my lowest point.



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Do you wonder what the best way is to count sets and reps? Why you shouldn't skip leg day? We have answers. This is #Gains, Explained, a space for you to ask any and every question about fitness. The Men's Health team (and other experts) are here for you.

To submit a question for a future column, fill out [this form](#).

#GAINS EXPLAINED

How do you stick to a fitness and health routine when you're depressed?

—Sad Squatter

YOU WON'T ALWAYS be in the mood to work out. As much as the fitness industrial complex pushes values like commitment to structure, willingness to hustle, and in some extreme cases, the “no days off” ethos, it's not realistic to believe that every person will be in the right headspace to fit an hour—or even a moment—dedicated to exercise into their routine day after day.

But it's one thing if you're just not particularly motivated to get up and get going to the gym every so often. When you're feeling depressed or experiencing more prolonged symptoms of depression—which can sometimes include physical effects like lethargy—your fitness plan will likely be the last thing on your mind. For some guys, this can become a vicious cycle, creating an adversarial relationship with exercise that makes it less likely that they're able to move and take care of their bodies and minds.

The first thing to know is that you're not alone. According to data from the National Institute of Mental Health, an estimated 8.4 percent of adults (representing 21.0 million people) in the United States experienced at least one major depressive episode in 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic had a major effect on depression rates; a study published in the *Lancet Regional Health - Americas* journal reported that number exploded through 2021, and 32.8 percent of adults experienced elevated depression symptoms through the period. Anyone can have depression. Workout warriors like former World's Strongest Man Eddie Hall and Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson have talked about their experiences with the condition.

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Be aware that depression isn't always about feeling hopeless or feeling little interest or pleasure in doing things (although those are signs, too). Subtle signs of depression include pushing other people away, drinking more than usual, and even weight gain. No matter how it manifests, it's important to get some help with it via a counselor, a telehealth app, someone in your religious circle, or through the new mental health helpline at 988.

Next, you can find a path to making progress. To learn some strategies you can use to take that first step, we spoke to Dr. Rachel Hershenberg, Ph.D. ABPP, a licensed clinical psychologist and Emory University professor whose book *Activating Happiness* aims to give people experiencing depression tools to help improve their lives.

That begins by giving yourself a break. "I don't want you to beat yourself up," she says. "A lot of times when we're depressed our minds are convincing us that we don't have the energy to get up and go—that's the hardest part."

Once you've given yourself some grace, you can start to put the pieces of your plan together. "One of the most important pieces is planning in

advance—having some type of a schedule. So trying to anticipate how to make a really concrete specific goal," Hershenberg says. Importantly, this doesn't mean that you have to tell yourself that you'll have a six-pack or that you'll go from couch to marathon in a month. Major aspirations can be a great way to fuel your workout fire, but in this case, small and achievable goals are even more important. "We want to start really small and try to fit it within something that might be more realistically attainable," says Hershenberg. Start by doing something as simple as taking a short walk.

Movement counts, no matter how small. You might need to unlearn some of the ways you think about fitness; the definition of what constitutes a "workout" cannot be as rigid as what you see on social media, or even something that makes you work so hard that you start to sweat. You should opt for enjoyment over everything else, according to Hershenberg. "Choose exercise that feels good in the body, and that is actually enjoyable and not more in the lines of a punishment," she advises, "because that's what motivates our behaviors, when it's actually something we can start to look forward to." Will you build muscle as efficiently as someone pumping out reps alone in the gym by walking around the block? No. But your focus is different, at least for now.

After you get yourself moving, pat yourself on the back and reflect on how major it was that you did *something*. You might feel silly getting hyped up about a trip around the block or a single set of pushups, but again, you need to recognize that you're operating under different standards when you're experiencing depression. "The rule of thumb would then be to really, really celebrate the fact that you made that forward progress," Hershenberg says. "And then to try to build in consistency, maybe you do the same thing the next day." This might even help with how you're feeling. "In mild and subclinical depression, exercise on its own is a really great thing," she says.

If you have trouble doing things by yourself, adding a social element can be helpful. Turn your solo walk into an opportunity to see a friend, or even taking a phone call while you move. For some guys, calling up a friend might be the last thing you want to do when you're depressed—but you can join a fitness class or group workout for less direct socialization if you have access. "A lot of folks respond well to having a sense of accountability," says Hershenberg. Once you're in these groups, that accountability shifts from being totally on yourself to the group, or the instructor. And if you're paying for the class, you'll be accountable to your wallet, too.

You might find that your workout plan isn't the only area of your life where you're struggling. If that's the case, and you find that you cannot take care of responsibilities at work or at home, Hershenberg says you

should look to get help. That could mean reaching out to a therapist or psychiatrist to find the best treatment plan for you.

To sum it up, just remember that every step counts when it comes to exercising—or doing anything, really—when you're experiencing depression. "I want the mentality to be little-by-little, and to really break all or nothing thinking about [working out]," says Hershenberg. "I think that's one of the biggest ingredients of change."

If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis or having suicidal thoughts, dial 988 for help.

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Brett Williams, a fitness editor at Men's Health, is a NASM-CPT certified trainer and former pro football player and tech reporter who splits his workout time between strength and conditioning training, martial arts, and running. You can find his work elsewhere at Mashable, Thrillist, and other outlets.