

Research Evidence for Alternative Treatments for Depression



If you experience one or more of the following symptoms for two weeks or more, you may be experiencing major depressive disorder (MDD) and should reach out to your health care provider:

- Feeling persistently hopeless, negative, empty, worthless or guilty
- Loss of interest in things you used to enjoy
- Low energy or feeling tired all the time
- Difficulty sleeping or oversleeping
- Extreme changes in appetite or weight
- Trouble concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Restlessness or anxiety

Talk to your health care provider immediately if you have more serious symptoms, like thoughts of death or hurting yourself.

The Military Health System offers highly effective treatments for depression. Treatments recommended in the 2016 Department of Veterans Affairs/Department of Defense clinical practice guideline (CPG) for MDD include antidepressant medications, acceptance and commitment therapy, behavioral therapy/behavioral activation, cognitive behavioral therapy, interpersonal therapy, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, and problem-solving therapy. Despite having these effective interventions, many patients and providers have questions about other depression treatments. It is important to know if there is sufficient research evidence to support the use of such alternative treatments. This resource lists many alternative depression treatments and summarizes the research evidence as of December 2020. Some of the treatments are based on interventions identified in the CPG.

Treatment	Description	Research Evidence
Exercise	A potential add-on to pharmacological treatment of depression, as well as an option for patients unresponsive to antidepressant medications or who experience adverse side effects	Recommended (with conditions). Some evidence suggests benefits of exercise in addition to other treatments, or for patients unwilling or unable to engage in psychotherapy or pharmacotherapy. The CPG recommends exercise as a standalone treatment for MDD with a “weak for” strength.
Light therapy (also bright light therapy or phototherapy)	Proposed as a treatment for MDD with a seasonal or non-seasonal pattern that involves exposure to artificial bright light at a prescribed brightness level and duration of time	Recommended (with conditions). The CPG recommends light therapy with a “weak for” strength for adult patients with mild to moderate MDD with a seasonal pattern.
Repetitive-transcranial magnetic stimulation (rTMS)	Involves placing a coil on the scalp over the brain region of interest and magnetic pulses pass through the skull and create small electrical currents that stimulate nearby neurons	Recommended (with conditions). The CPG recommends rTMS with a “weak for” strength for patients with treatment-resistant MDD.
St. John’s wort (SJW)	Plant used for its antidepressant properties	Recommended (with conditions). The CPG recommends SJW with a “weak for” strength for patients with mild MDD. The CPG cautions <i>against</i> using SJW for moderate to severe MDD, women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, or in combination with another antidepressant.
Botulinum toxin (BTX)	BTX is injected between the eyebrows (Glabellar injection) and is being investigated in the treatment of depression	Insufficient evidence. There is not enough evidence to recommend use or caution against use.

Treatment	Description	Research Evidence
Cranial electrotherapy stimulation (CES)	Non-invasive, prescribed treatment for depression involving the self-application of electrical magnetic fields to the scalp	Insufficient evidence. There is not enough evidence to recommend use or caution against use.
Yoga	Practice that encompasses ethical living, spiritual practice, physical activity, breathing exercises, and meditation	Insufficient Evidence. There is not enough evidence to recommend use or caution against use.
Vagus nerve stimulation (VNS)	Involves an invasive procedure where a pulse generator is implanted below the skin in the patient's chest, which connects to electrodes on the left vagus nerve in the neck	Not recommended. The CPG strongly recommends <i>against</i> VNS for MDD (including severe treatment-resistant depression) based on a lack of evidence, safety concerns, and costs.

“Weak for” strength of recommendation: The intervention is suggested, but there is less confidence that benefits outweigh potential harms.

Insufficient evidence: Evidence that the intervention is effective is lacking, poor quality, or conflicting, and the balance of benefits and harms cannot be determined.

Disclaimer: No one treatment is right for everyone. Consult your provider about other medications and treatment options to determine which treatment is best for you based on the benefits, risks, and side effects of each treatment.

Resources



Military/Veterans Crisis Line provides free, confidential support for service members and veterans in crisis. Call 800-273-8255 (Español 888-628-9454) and press 1 or text 838255 to chat live with a counselor.
veteranscrisisline.net



Military OneSource provides 24/7 support and information on housing, financial, legal, medical and psychological services state side at 800-342-9647, overseas at 800-3429-6477, or collect at 484-530-5908.
militaryonesource.mil



MoodHacker resilience tool lets you track, understand and improve how you're feeling. Your mood affects how satisfied you are with your life as well as your relationships with other people. Rate your mood, track your progress toward an improved mood, and use evidence-based techniques to improve how you feel with MoodHacker.
militaryonesource.mil/confidential-help/interactive-tools-services/resilience-tools/improve-your-mood-with-moodhacker/



Real Warriors provides information and testimonies to share personal experiences which encourage service members and veterans to seek professional help quickly when it will have the greatest impact.
realwarriors.net

Mobile Apps



Breathe2Relax
Trains users on the "belly breathing" technique that has proven benefits to reduce stress and improve overall mental health. Use the app's breathing exercises to learn and practice on your own or as part of a stress management program supervised by your health care provider.
onemindpsyberguide.org/apps/breathe2relax



Mindfulness Coach
Can be used to learn mindful techniques which have been shown to be effective in reducing stress, improving depression and emotional balance.
mobile.va.gov/app/mindfulness-coach



Positive Activity Jackpot
Helps users who may be overwhelmed by depression build resilience by helping them find nearby enjoyable activities
onemindpsyberguide.org/apps/positive-activity-jackpot/



T2 Mood Tracker
Helps users monitor their moods and general well-being over time and provides a tool to share this information with their health care providers.
myhealthapps.net/app/details/18/t2-mood-tracker



Virtual Hope Box
Contains simple tools to help users with coping, relaxation, distraction and positive thinking using personalized audio, video, pictures, games, mindfulness exercises, activity planning, inspirational quotes and coping statements.
onemindpsyberguide.org/apps/virtual-hope-box-review/

References:

All information on research evidence listed above was obtained from Psychological Health Center of Excellence Psych Health Evidence Briefs for posttraumatic stress disorder. These briefs can be found at health.mil/ResearchAnalytics.



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