

Natural Approaches to Improve Depression

Xiomara Romero, M.S., LMFT, and Phil Rainer, M.S.W., LCSW-R
Advocates for Human Potential, Inc.

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At the time of this publication, Miriam E. Delphin-Rittmon, Ph.D., served as Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Administrator of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

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Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

The purpose of the MHTTC Network is technology transfer - disseminating and implementing evidence-based practices for mental disorders into the field.

Funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the MHTTC Network includes 10 Regional Centers and a Network Coordinating Office.

Our collaborative network supports resource development and dissemination, training and technical assistance, and workforce development for the mental health field. We work with systems, organizations, and treatment practitioners involved in the delivery of mental health services to strengthen their capacity to deliver effective evidence-based practices to individuals. Our services cover the full continuum spanning mental illness prevention, treatment, and recovery support.

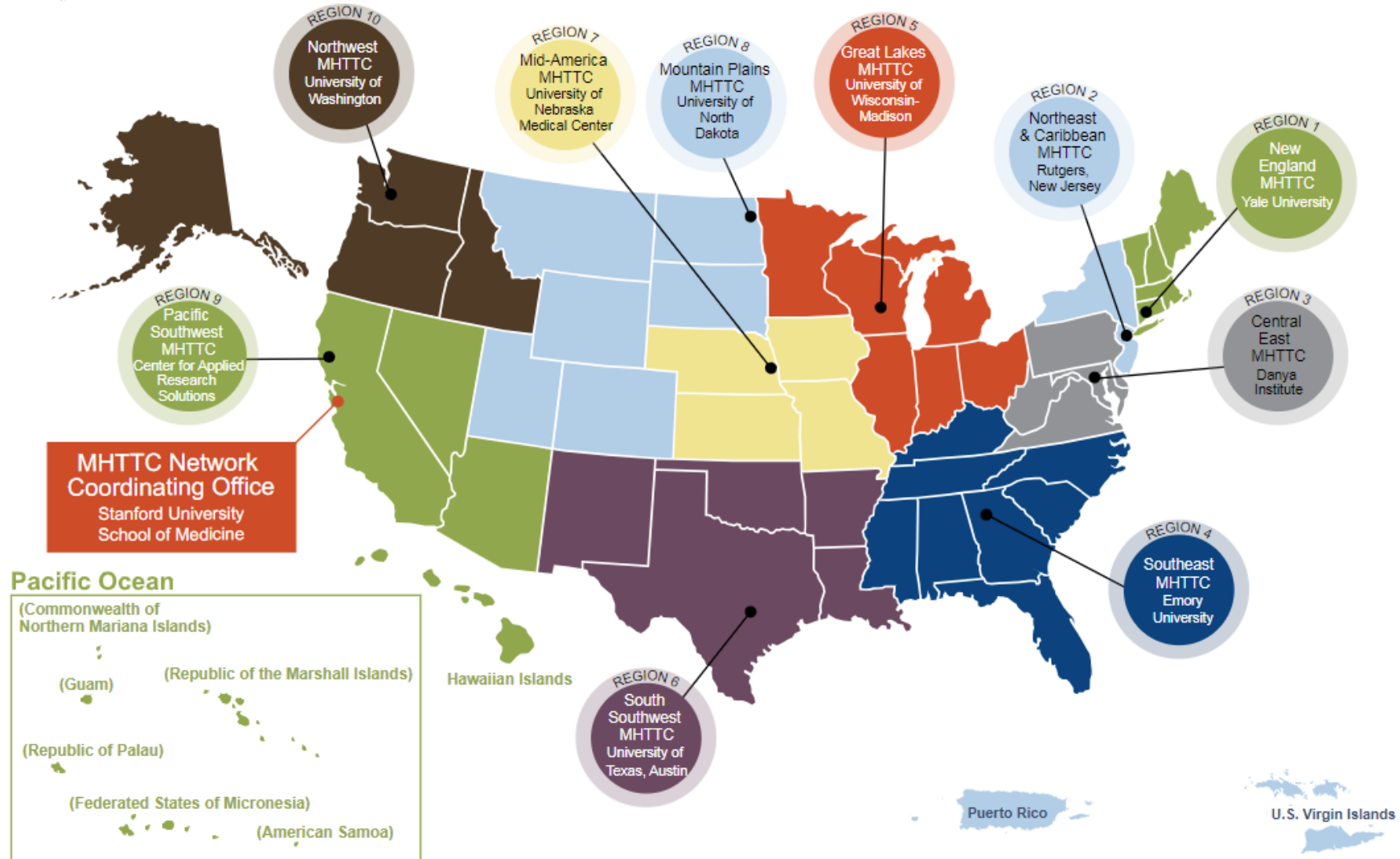


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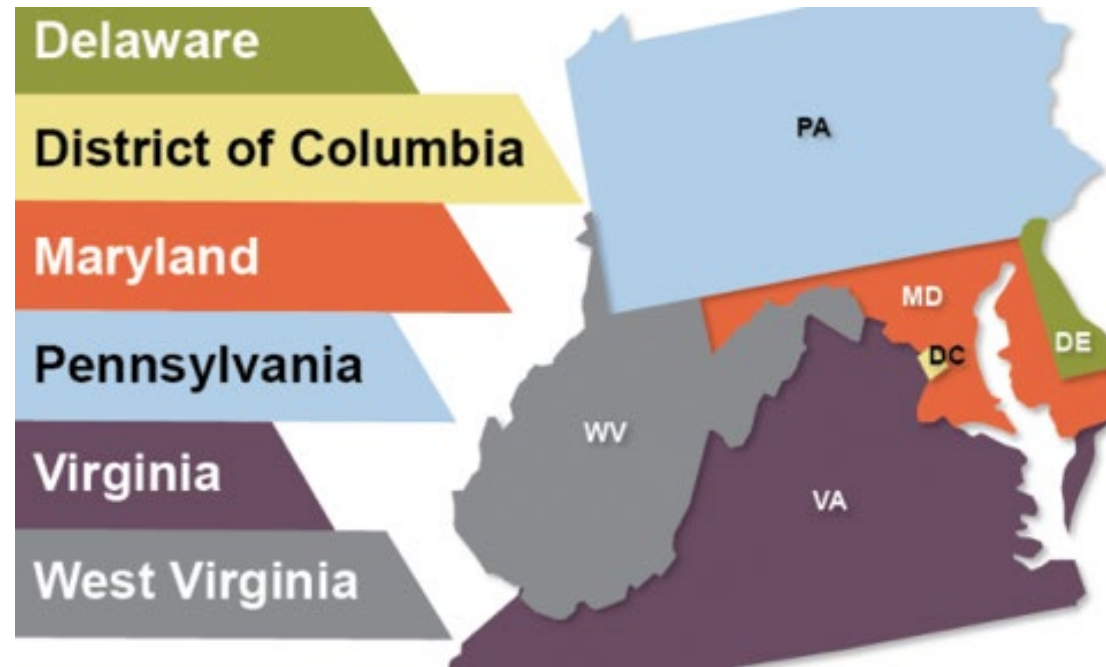
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Central East Region 3



Central East (HHS Region 3)

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The MHTTC Network uses affirming, respectful and recovery-oriented language in all activities. That language is:

STRENGTHS-BASED
AND HOPEFUL

INCLUSIVE AND
ACCEPTING OF
DIVERSE CULTURES,
GENDERS,
PERSPECTIVES,
AND EXPERIENCES

HEALING-CENTERED AND
TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE

INVITING TO INDIVIDUALS
PARTICIPATING IN THEIR
OWN JOURNEYS

PERSON-FIRST AND
FREE OF LABELS

NON-JUDGMENTAL AND
AVOIDING ASSUMPTIONS

RESPECTFUL, CLEAR
AND UNDERSTANDABLE

CONSISTENT WITH
OUR ACTIONS,
POLICIES, AND PRODUCTS

Introductions



Phil Rainer, M.S.W., LCSW-R
Behavioral Health Consultant
Advocates for Human Potential, Inc.



Xiomara Romero, M.S., LMFT
Senior Program Associate II
Advocates for Human Potential, Inc.

Natural Approaches to Improve Depression

Objectives

Participants in this webinar will be able to:

1. Recognize links between modern Western culture and the increasing prevalence of depression.
2. Identify cultural patterns common among ancestral human societies believed to support physical, social, and emotional well-being.
3. Describe natural interventions that can be incorporated into modern life that have been shown to improve depression and well-being.
4. List strategies for including natural interventions in behavioral health services to support improved mood.

Ice-Breaker



- Think about an annoying gnat buzzing around you.
- You try to get it out of the way, but it keeps buzzing around you.
- What do you notice?
- How does your body feel?
- Do you notice any tension in specific areas of your body?



- Think of your favorites, such as foods, friends, or activities.
- When scrolling through your phone, who brings a smile to your face?
- Now notice your body.
- Has there been any shift to the tension you were feeling before?



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1. Recognize links between modern Western culture and the increasing prevalence of depression.

“Human beings were never designed for the poorly nourished, sedentary, indoor, sleep-deprived, socially isolated, frenzied pace of twenty-first century life.”¹

–Stephen Ilardi, Ph.D.



Depression in the United States: Record High²

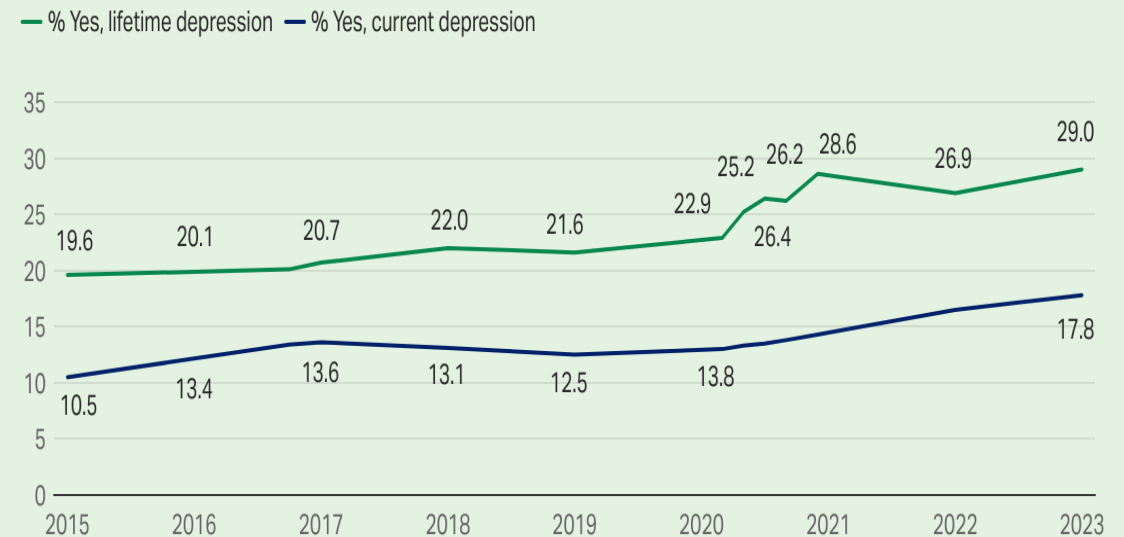
From 2015 to 2023:

- Lifetime adult rate up from 19.6% to 29.0%
- Rate currently diagnosed up from 10.5% to 17.8%

Rising Trends: Lifetime and Current Depression Rates

Has a doctor or nurse ever told you that you have depression?

Do you currently have or are you currently being treated for depression?



GALLUP

Variable Depression Rates by Demographic Groups²

Lifetime and Current Depression Rates, by Subgroup

| | Diagnosed with depression in lifetime | | | Currently have/treated for depression | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|----------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|----------|--------------------|
| | 2017 (%) | 2023 (%) | Change (pct. pts.) | 2017 (%) | 2023 (%) | Change (pct. pts.) |
| U.S. adults | 20.6 | 29.0 | 8.4 | 13.5 | 17.8 | 4.3 |
| Gender | | | | | | |
| Men | 14.7 | 20.4 | 5.7 | 9.3 | 11.3 | 2.0 |
| Women | 26.2 | 36.7 | 10.5 | 17.6 | 23.8 | 6.2 |
| Age | | | | | | |
| 18 to 29 | 20.4 | 34.3 | 13.9 | 13.0 | 24.6 | 11.6 |
| 30 to 44 | 22.3 | 34.9 | 12.6 | 14.2 | 20.7 | 6.5 |
| 45 to 64 | 20.4 | 26.1 | 5.7 | 14.0 | 16.2 | 2.2 |
| 65 and older | 19.3 | 21.3 | 2.0 | 12.1 | 11.9 | -0.2 |
| Race/Ethnicity | | | | | | |
| Black adults | 20.1 | 34.4 | 14.3 | 12.3 | 15.9 | 3.6 |
| Hispanic adults | 18.4 | 31.3 | 12.9 | 13.0 | 18.8 | 5.8 |
| White adults | 22.3 | 29.0 | 6.7 | 14.7 | 18.2 | 3.5 |

GALLUP

Ancestral Human Lifestyle^{3,4}

2.5 Million Years: Hunter-Gatherer Societies

- Small bands of up to 100 individuals
- Egalitarian social structure
- Close social ties
- Outdoor living with:
 - Green space
 - Water nearby
 - Full-spectrum sunlight
- Physically active
- Whole foods: lean meats/mostly plants
- Restfulness: Conserve energy!



Modern Western Human Lifestyle¹

- Agricultural Revolution: 10,000 years
- Industrial Revolution: 250 years
- Data Revolution: 40 years



Insufficient time for biological adaptation!

Wellness Challenges of Western Culture

Chronic
stress

Loneliness

Competition

Sedentary
lifestyle

Fast food

Indoor
lighting

Sleep
deprivation

Hedonic
treadmill and
consumerism

Technology
and social
media



Chronic Stress⁵

Chronic Mild Stress Model of Depression:

- **Based on human response to chronic stress**
- For developing antidepressant medications
- **Involves “prolonged exposure . . . to unpredictable/uncontrollable mild stressors”**
- Leads to changes in appetite, “behavioral despair, locomotor inhibition, anxiety-like changes,” and physical health problems



Health Effects of Chronic Stress⁶

Digestive
system

Cardiovascular
system

Respiratory
system

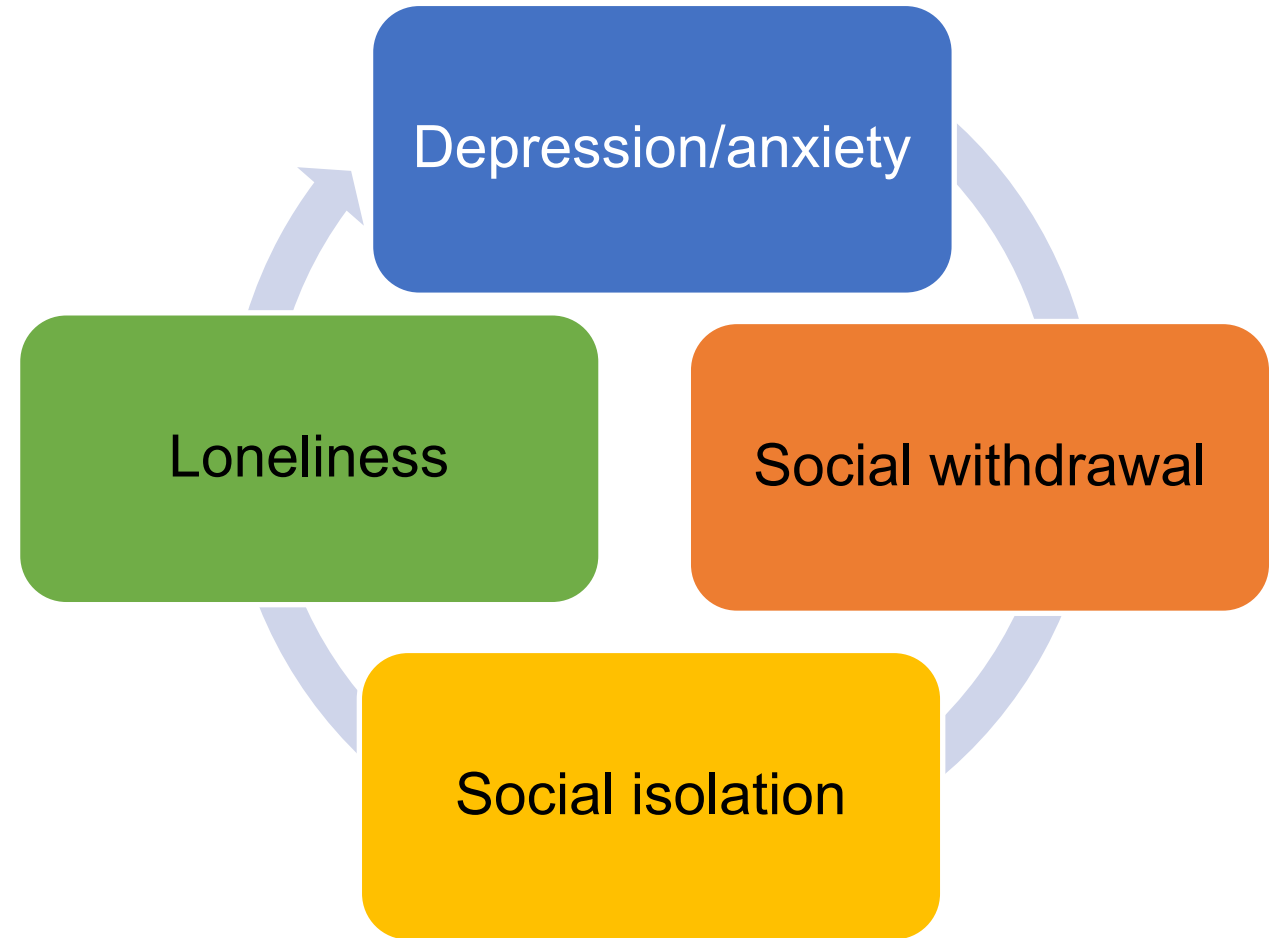
Immune
system

Reproductive
system

Muscular
system

Loneliness⁷

- Lonely adults report more than double the rate of depression than non-lonely adults.
- Lonely children have increased rates of anxiety and depression.
- Frequently confiding in others reduced depression among high-risk individuals.
- Loneliness and social isolation increase risk for self-harm and suicide.



Competition



Workplace competition threatening job security, loss of income, or public humiliation elicits fear and anxiety.⁹

College students perceiving high competition in classes report higher rates of depression (37%) and anxiety (69%).⁸

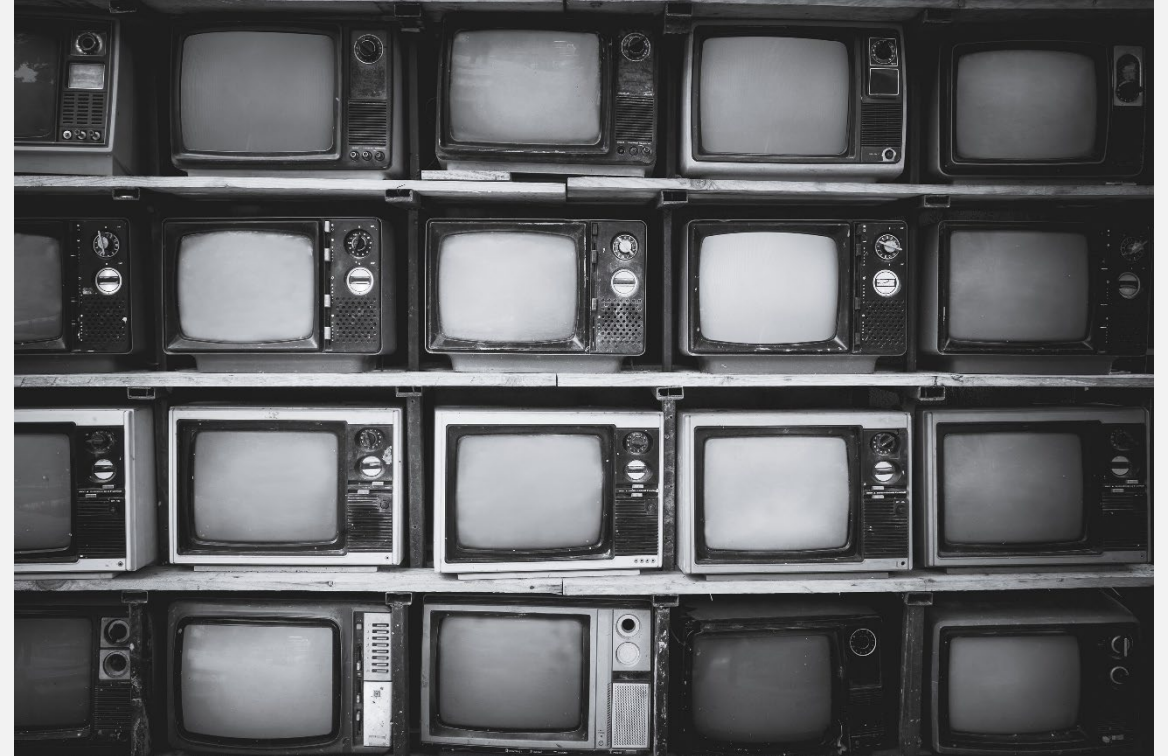
[Competition, Anxiety, and Depression in the College Classroom: Variations by Student Identity and Field of Study \(usc.edu\)](#)

[The Pros and Cons of Competition Among Employees \(hbr.org\)](#)

Sedentary Lifestyle

“Mentally passive sedentary behaviors” are linked with depression.¹¹

People who exercised three to five times per week were found to have 43.2% fewer days of poor mental health.¹⁰



[Association between physical exercise and mental health in 1.2 million individuals in the USA between 2011 and 2015: a cross-sectional study - The Lancet Psychiatry](#)
[Sedentary behaviors and risk of depression: a meta-analysis of prospective studies | Translational Psychiatry \(nature.com\)](#)

Fast Food¹²



Increased Depression Risk

- High intake of red/processed meat
- Refined grains
- Sweets
- High-fat dairy
- Gravy



Decreased Depression Risk

- Fruit
- Vegetables
- Whole grains
- Fish
- Olive oil
- Low-fat dairy
- Low animal food intake

Indoor Lighting¹³



- Indoor lighting lacks mood-elevating effects of:
- Full natural light spectrum
 - Brightness

Sleep Deprivation¹⁴

Insufficient sleep is very common:

- Stress
- Worry
- Excessive work
- Family/social obligations
- Sleep apnea
- Insomnia
- TV binging
- Shift work



Hedonic Treadmill and Consumerism¹⁵

- Americans have more stuff than ever.
- Yet, depression and anxiety are rising steadily.
- Preoccupation with “getting and spending’ . . . takes time away from the things that can nurture happiness, including relationships with family and friends.”



Technology and Social Media¹⁶

Adolescent social media use of more than 3 hours per day is linked with:

- Double the risk of poor mental health, including anxiety and depression
- Body dissatisfaction
- Disordered eating
- Social comparison
- Low self-esteem



Helplessness Response and Learned Control¹⁷

- **Helplessness and inactivity** in the face of perceived “uncontrollable aversive events” is the default response.
- Chronic stress can evoke this innate response.
- The good news is we can shift from a sense of helplessness to a sense of mastery and learned control.



[Learned helplessness at fifty: Insights from neuroscience. \(apa.org\)](https://www.apa.org)



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2. Identify cultural patterns common among ancestral human societies believed to support physical, social, and emotional well-being.

Why Are These Women Smiling?



Ancestral Societies and Well-Being¹⁸

Low stress:

- Work about 15 hours/week getting food
- Work 15-20 hours/week on domestic chores
- Time to relax



Social Connection^{18,19}

- Small communities: 100-150.
- Everyone knows each other.
- Focus is on family and friends.
- Isolation is rare.



[Affluence Without Abundance: The Disappearing World of the Bushmen: James Suzman: Bloomsbury USA](#) [New Book Argues That Hunter-Gatherers May Be Happier Than Wealthy Westerners : Goats and Soda : NPR](#)

Affluence¹⁸

Affluence based on having few needs that are easily met



Outdoor Living

Outside all day:

- Full-spectrum light
- Very active
- Green space
- Near water
- Teamwork



Present Focus



View life as ongoing cycle: Not striving for brighter future.

Present in the here and now.

Focus on meeting immediate needs.

Mindful and in the moment.



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3. Describe natural interventions that can be incorporated into modern life that have been shown to improve depression and well-being.

Sleep

Nature

**Light
exposure**

**Social
support**

Nutrition

Exercise



“Sleep is the single most effective thing we can do to reset our brain and body health each day.”²¹

—Matthew Walker



Improving sleep outcomes

- **75 effective field-tested sleep strategies**
- **Including sleep education³⁴**
- **The responsibility of the Individual, organizational and public level³⁵**

[Sleep is essential to health: an American Academy of Sleep Medicine position statement | Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine \(aasm.org\)](#)

[Why Sleep Matters—The Economic Costs of Insufficient Sleep - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)

"Close relationships, more than money or fame, are what keep people happy throughout their lives..., Those ties protect people from life's discontents, help to delay mental and physical decline, and are better predictors of long and happy lives than social class, IQ, or even genes."³⁷

SOCIAL SUPPORT



Nutrition



There is an association between higher quality of diet and “lower risk for the onset of depressive symptoms.”²⁴

“Healthy dietary patterns are associated with less depressive symptoms.”²⁵

Poor diet, among other factors such as “psychosocial stressors . . . physical inactivity, obesity, smoking, altered gut permeability, atopy, dental cares (sic), sleep and vitamin D deficiency” “appear to increase the risk for the development of depression . . . associated with systemic inflammation.”²⁶

Benefits of Green Light Exposure

- **RELIEVES PAIN²⁷**
- **ENHANCES MOOD²⁸**
- **IMPROVES SLEEP²⁹**
- **IMPROVES COGNITIVE PERFORMANCE³⁰**



“Exercising starts a biological cascade of events that results in many health benefits.”³³

[Exercise is an all-natural treatment to fight depression - Harvard Health](#)



“Participants who walked in nature had lower levels of rumination and greater improvements in mood compared to those who walked in an urban environment.”³²

[Nature experience reduces rumination and subgenual prefrontal cortex activation | PNAS](#)

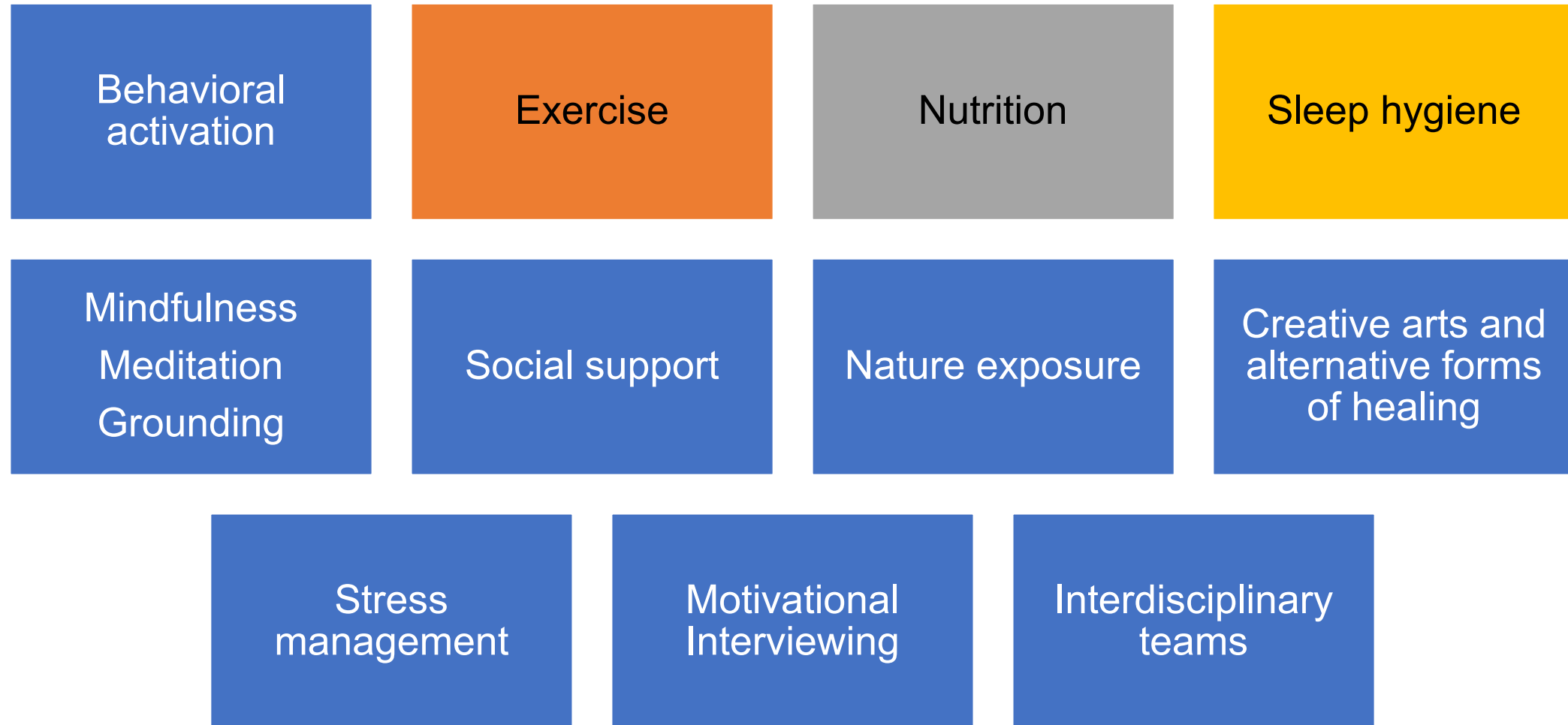


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4. List strategies for including natural interventions in behavioral health services to support improved mood.

Natural Strategies in Behavioral Health³⁶



Rx

What natural approaches will you be prescribing to manage your clients' depression?





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