The blues are part of life—particularly for some of us. Women are twice as likely as men to be depressed at some point in their lifetime, especially during menopause, when depression rates spike. Hormones are involved, but they don’t explain all gloominess. The good news? There’s a wide variety of therapies that can help. Read on to learn how to boost your mood.

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**Mother Nature’s Mood-Boosting Secrets**
Chill Out

When you’re feeling down in the dumps—whether it’s after a long, stressful day at work or some bummer news from your BFF—one more silly cat video or episode of Modern Family can get you only so far. We all know that a sweat session creates an endorphin boost and that a laugh with a pal can turn around a depressing day, but did you know there are other quick strategies that can make your mood happier almost instantly?

Turn On Music
Music really does soothe the soul. It activates brain pleasure centers, makes us feel connected, and shifts our focus. Playing tunes linked with happy times helps, of course, but sad tunes work, too—if only because we can grant ourselves the relief of turning them off. A BBC poll found the melancholy “I Know It’s Over” by the Smiths to be the best musical remedy for depressive symptoms.

Go on Facebook
Which activity can brighten your mood?
1. A shot and a beer
2. Watching a How I Met Your Mother marathon
3. Playing Farmville on Facebook
4. Eating chocolate
The answer is 3. You may think of Facebook as a total waste of time, but taking a little brain break from a project to browse your friends’ status updates or new vacation photos can make you feel better than viewing a slide show of relaxing pictures, found one study.

Get Enough Shut-Eye
A good night’s sleep is important on many levels. Sleep-deprived people are almost 10 times more likely to be depressed than those with healthier slumber, a major study has found. “During sleep, the body renews neuro-transmitters that are critical for mental wellness,” says psychiatrist Samantha Meltzer-Brody, MD, an associate professor at the University of North Carolina’s Center for Women’s Mood Disorders. Indeed, a study in Psychology Press found that people with good sleep quality had a better handle on their emotions and were better able to deal with negative experiences. The ingredients of good sleep will be familiar: regular sleep and wake times, at least 7 hours of shuteye, and no electronic screens in the last hour before bedtime.

Flip through Memories
“When you need a mood boost, it can be really helpful to open your photo app and look through images from happy times. It’s like a diary of your life in a visual format,” says Gretchen Rubin, author of The Happiness Project series and cohost of the podcast Happier with Gretchen Rubin. This simple step can take you back to a more smiley moment, like your sister’s wedding or your safari in South Africa, and remind you of how many reasons you have to be happy.

Clean House
“A big mood booster for me is tidying up,” Rubin says. “External order—putting things in their place and tossing things you don’t need—can make you less stressed. Outer order offers inner calm and energy for many.” You don’t need loads of time to tackle that gargantuan garage, either. A smaller tidy-up task like a linen closet or refrigerator offers the biggest mood benefits, she adds.

Eat Yourself Happy

What you eat can have an enormous effect on your mood. “Your brain releases dopamine in anticipation of eating good food, and that anticipation makes eating even more pleasurable,” says Alex Korb, a postdoctoral researcher in neuroscience at UCLA. What’s more, certain foods, like the ones on the following pages, are blessed with compounds that lift your spirits. How can you resist that?

Drink to a Better Mood
Frazzled, unfocused, or just plain angry? Mother Nature’s got a few sippable tricks up her sleeve, packed with just the right nutrients to get you out of whatever funk you’re in. And no, there’s no alcohol involved.

Chamomile Tea Latte
Chamomile tea helps ease anxiety and irritability, while milk from grass-fed cows has conjugated linoleic acid, a fat that may help counteract stress hormone cortisol.

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Eat to Fix a Funk
The term comfort food is a bit of a misnomer. We indulge in stuff like milkshakes and cheeseburgers to soothe ourselves, but they can actually have the opposite effect once they pass our lips—and it’s not just because our clothes feel distressingly tighter.

According to researchers who have studied the link, fast food and packaged pastries can cause inflammation that interferes with mood-regulating chemicals in the brain and can even lead to symptoms of depression. Fortunately, no matter what it is you crave, there are plenty of yummy and satisfying options that will buoy your mood and slim you down.

YOU CRAVE FAT
Some experts say the tendency to seek out fattening foods may be a leftover evolutionary urge, since bulking up may also bolster your immune system.

THE FIX
You can get your buzz from caffeine. Caffeine is a psychoactive drug that works sort of like a harmless crack cocaine, increasing dopamine and serotonin transmission within just 30 minutes. A study in the Archives of Internal Medicine found that it may slash depression risk in women. Research from the Nurses’ Health Study tells us that women who drank two to three cups of caffeinated coffee a day were about 15% less likely to become depressed. Just don’t overdo it or drink it too late in the day—Rossman recommends two to three 8-ounce cups daily—since studies link too little sleep to weight gain.

Cutting back on caffeine? Load up on B vitamins instead: B12, B9 (aka folate), and B6 help convert amino acids into the mood- and energy-lifting neurotransmitters serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine, according to Ramsey. Sources include poultry, leafy greens, fish, lentils, and eggs.

YOU CRAVE SWEETS
High-sugar diets are linked to an increased risk of depression, and the sweet stuff causes blood sugar spikes that can make you grumpy, says Jeffrey Rossman, PhD, the author of The Mind-Body Mood Solution.

THE FIX
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YOU CRAVE CARBS
There’s a reason so many so-called comfort foods like mashed potatoes and lasagna are carb based: Carbs fuel the production of serotonin, your brain’s main feel-good neurotransmitter, which activates receptors that help control mood and appetite. But careful: Not all carbs are created equal.

THE FIX
Eat complex carbs like whole grain cereal, rice, and oatmeal, which are digested more slowly than refined grains, staving off hunger (and crankiness). For spuds, swap white ones for sweet potatoes, which are rich in B vitamins and lycopene, nutrients that have been shown to help depression.

Feeling SAD? It might be a lack of vitamin D, which may be the most important nutrient for chasing away the blues. A study published by the Mayo Clinic found that higher levels of vitamin D were directly related to a decreased risk of depression. Because much of the D in our bodies is made using UVB rays from the sun, those who live in northern locations may run low on this vitamin, especially in winter, when not only are the days shorter, but also the angle of the sun is so indirect that fewer UVB rays break through the atmosphere.

So, if you live north of Atlanta, pack your diet with D-rich foods, including fortified low-fat dairy and cereal, pork, mushrooms, and tuna. With about a third of the vitamin D (and most of the DHA and EPA omega-3s) you need each day, canned tuna is pretty much happiness in a tin.

Eat Sunshine
Because much of the decreased risk of depression.

A Raw Deal
Consider eating your veggies uncooked. Many mood-boosting nutrients, such as folate (found in kale, lentils, asparagus, broccoli, and beets), are damaged by heat, says Drew Ramsey, MD, an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Columbia University and a coauthor of The Happiness Diet. What’s more, Harvard researchers found that cooking food can actually decrease how many calories your body uses during digestion. (We burn off about 10% of what we consume through digestion, a not insignificant amount.)

If you can’t imagine subsisting on a completely raw diet, try steaming your veggies. A Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry study reports that this cooking technique best preserves the nutrients you need.
and fortified cereals. Bonus: Canned clams, even those in canned chowder, are enough to give you a B12 boost.

**Yogurt and Kefir**

*Key ingredient: Probiotic Bacteria*

Consuming probiotic-rich foods might help you think fewer negative thoughts, says a 2015 study published in the journal *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity*. This bacteria is the healthy kind that lives in your gut. A UCLA study found that women who ate probiotic yogurt twice a day were less agitated when shown pictures of angry and frightened faces. Likewise, mice fed a probiotic (*Lactobacillus rhamnosus*, available in supplement forms such as Culturelle) remained chill even when forced to do difficult tasks.

**Why They May Work**

Your gut and your brain communicate via the vagus nerve, so good bacteria may be spreading a chill-out message. Probiotics may also alter receptors of the brain neurotransmitter GABA, which helps to calm you down. Look for yogurt that says it “contains live and active cultures.”

And make it Greek for an extra boost. The protein in Greek yogurt increases levels of mood-boosting neurotransmitters while giving your gut a dose of probiotics, which research links to improved mood.

**Walnuts and Flax**

*Key ingredient: Alpha-Linolenic Acid*

In research from the Nurses’ Health Study, women who had the most ALA in their diets were less likely to be depressed.

**Why It May Work**

When your blood levels of ALA are low, so are you. Low ALA levels fan the flames of inflammation, which has been linked to depression. What’s more, low ALA decreases levels of the brain chemicals dopamine, which is responsible for feelings of joy, and serotonin, which helps inhibit anger and aggression.

**Chocolate**

*Key ingredient: Polyphenols*

According to research published in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, people who received a dose of cocoa polyphenols equivalent to 1 ounce of dark chocolate felt calmer and more content than their placebo-fed counterparts. In an Australian study, researchers reported that among the volunteers who drank a dark-chocolate drink laced with 0, 250, or 500 mg of polyphenols—antioxidants in chocolate, tea, and other foods—those who chugged the biggest dose also got a shot of calm.

**Why They May Work**

Some polyphenols act on the brain neurotransmitter GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid), regulating the excitability of your brain cells (excitable cells may overreact to stress, which can lead to depression), and adenosine, a chemical that, when suppressed by polyphenols, increases the production of dopamine.

**Four More Happy Foods**

- **Pomegranates** lowered blood pressure, anxiety, and depression in study participants who drank a glass of pomegranate juice every day for 2 weeks.
- **Apricots** contain the antioxidants beta-carotene, lutein, and zeaxanthin, higher levels of which have been linked to better moods.
- **Radishes** may lift mood by stimulating the release of dopamine and norepinephrine.
- **Shiitake mushrooms** have an uplifting effect due to their high selenium and magnesium content.

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**Change Your Outlook**

Pathy can seep into all areas of your life, but chances are you do have a reason (or three) to be happy. Sussing those out and acting on them can boost your overall contentment.

**Compare Yourself to Someone Less Fortunate**

Try a thespian’s trick: Picture someone who is upbeat and passionate and ask yourself, *What would she do?* Then do that, says clinical psychologist Elizabeth Lombardo, PhD, the author of *A Happy You: Your Ultimate Prescription for Happiness*. Or finish this sentence once a day: “I’m glad I’m not …” Research shows that happiness levels may be influenced by how we compare ourselves with others who are worse off than we are.

**Get Some Exercise**

Exercising for as little as 30 minutes a day can help you ditch depression by naturally increasing your levels of serotonin, an all-important hormone that regulates mood and energy. In one study, women who sat less than 4 hours a day and met physical activity guidelines (like 30 minutes of brisk walking most days) were three times less likely to be depressed than women who sat more than 7 hours and were not active.

Begin by going for short walks, then increase the intensity by walking faster or by using hand weights. No matter how badly your day begins, working out can turn everything around—and that sense of euphoria won’t disappear after your cooldown. According to research published in *JAMA Psychiatry*, those who get that lift three times a week lower their depression risk by nearly 20% versus those who don’t exercise. Sweat often equals happy days.

**Hang Out with a Pet**

Just half an hour with a pooch can trigger your noggin to release brain chemicals linked to happiness. (Bonus: The pup gets the same feel-good lift!) Cats can also help ease the blues. Kitty owners can be less lonely and have higher morale than those who don’t have a cat, likely because cuddling with an animal can unleash oxytocin, the body’s “love”hormone.

**Give Back**

When you have more than you need, it’s better for your mood to share than spend more on yourself. “Offer an extra coupon to a stranger at the store or give a friend an unexpected little gift. It might seem counterintuitive to not splurge on a treat for yourself, but the benefits last far longer if you share the wealth,” says Jaime Kurtz, associate professor of psychology at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, VA.
One idea that takes nearly zero time and effort: Buy a Starbucks card and post the code on Facebook or Instagram so friends in need of a pick-me-up can help themselves. It’ll give you warm fuzzies for hours, if not days, to think of all of your happily buzzed buddies.

**Write a Thank-You Note**
Snail mail shouldn’t go extinct. “Thank you notes strengthen relationships. It’s important for others to know that you appreciate them. They should certainly not go out of style!” Kurtz says. Penning one each week has been proven to boost life satisfaction and happiness levels, reports the *Journal of Happiness Studies*. Whether it’s for a friend who always answers your “Send help!” texts or a family member who treated you to dinner, stock up on stamps and send out some gratitude at least every 7 days.

**Smile Already**
“Grin and bear it” isn’t such dumb advice after all. When smiling turns out to be a mood booster for customer service reps (who must tactfully deal with the crankiest people on the planet), you know it’s worth a try. A study conducted at Michigan State University found that customer service employees who smiled throughout the day reported feeling more serene overall.

Though it may be hard to find the joy in a traffic jam, smiling does wonders to lower your body’s stress response and quells any road rage feelings, according to a study published in *Psychological Science*.

Even faking a smile eased stress and boosted moods in a University of Kansas study. Researchers used chopsticks placed in the mouths of the volunteers to create a broad smile, a standard smile, or a neutral face (that was to hide the reason for the study). Some were also asked to smile. Then all were subjected to stressful lab tests such as plunging their hands into ice water. Smilers, even the ones who faked it, had lower heart rates afterward, a sign that they weren’t stressed out.

Even when you don’t feel like doing it, smiling relaxes you—so lift those lip corners, already.

**Practice Compassion**
When you extend your heart to others, it benefits you. “We know that as a species, we flourish and thrive when we care for others,” says James Doty, a neurosurgeon and director of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University. “Not only do you feel happier, but you feel better and you live longer.” When you help someone, your heart rate decreases, the feel-good hormone oxytocin is released, and regions of the brain linked to nurturing and feelings of pleasure light up. Compassion relaxes the nervous system, optimizes the body’s ability to heal itself, and strengthens intimacy in relationships. Research shows that when you watch someone give money to charity, it’s as though you received a gift yourself.

**Avoid Emotional Meltdowns**
A knee-jerk reaction to a tough situation can leave you looking like a fool. Learn to manage the moment and you’ll be happier, healthier, and a lot more fun to be around.

**Meditate About Someone Else**
Researchers at the University of Wisconsin–Madison found that an ancient meditation technique can train people to become more compassionate. To try it, sit comfortably in a quiet place and envision someone who is suffering. Then, for a few minutes, repeat the phrase “May you be free from suffering: may you have joy and ease.” Try this for a week.

**Socialize Phone-Free**
Technology distracts us from the present, which discourages connection and compassion. The next time you’re at a party or having dinner with friends or visiting with family, turn your phone off. Pay attention. Listen. Make eye contact. Be fully present. Then notice how you feel afterward.

**GO AHEAD AND OFFER SOMETHING**
When you encounter a loved one, a colleague, or even a stranger in line at the supermarket, ask yourself: What does this person need at this moment? A hug? An offer to help with the kids for 30 minutes? Five dollars? A sympathetic ear? Then, if it feels right, fulfill that unspoken need. Do this periodically and note the effect it has on other people—and you.

**The Remedy**
Apologize to the waiter and your tablemates, and then be sure to leave a generous tip, says Lauren M. Bloom, author of *The Art of the Apology*.

**The Situation**
Your boyfriend’s ex calls just to say hi, and you act like he cheated.

**The Remedy**
Own up to your feelings and admit that you acted like a tool, Post Senning says. Then promise him you’ll handle your jealousy better in the future.

**The Situation**
A waiter messes up your order, and you rip into him.

**The Remedy**
Flash a peace sign, even if it feels silly or difficult. “It’ll help calm your road rage,” says New York City psychologist Jeffrey Gardere, PhD.

**The Situation**
A junior colleague fumbles a task, so you blow up at her.

**The Remedy**
Fess up to your boss before someone else talks. “If it’s not typical behavior, you’ll probably be forgiven,” says Bloom. Then apologize to your colleague.

**The Situation**
A friendly dinner with your sister erupts into shouting.

**The Remedy**
Tell Sis her opinions are valid. That statement alone can keep heads cool, says Daniel Post Senning, coauthor of *Emily Post’s Etiquette*.

**The Situation**
When you watch someone give money to charity, it’s as though you received a gift yourself.

**The Remedy**
Ask more questions so your sister has a chance to explain herself. If tempers flare anyway, give her the last word and drop it.