

# Starting Strength

## Depression and Training

by

Andrew Lewis

As I write this, I don't want to work out. I don't want to do anything productive. Nothing seems enjoyable or motivating. I just want to lay on the couch and stare into space. I don't even want to type these words.

I suffer from "depression," the psychological condition characterized by being in a bad mood and an aversion to activity. It's been a problem for me.

Despite this, I'm going to go to my basement in ten minutes and lift. It will make me feel better, and it will get me closer to my goals. I've done this more times than I can recall, knowing each time I don't feel like lifting. After, however, I always feel better, and I'm glad I did it.

Lifting will make you feel better. No shit, right? Everyone knows this, but when the depressive inertia sets in, it can be hard to get out of bed and make yourself train. You have to resist the inertia. Once you get done with your workout, you will feel better, and if not, at least you got something done. I can't speak for others, but there is a feedback loop associated with my depression. I don't feel like doing anything, so I get nothing done. Then I have nothing to show for my week which makes me feel like a piece of shit, so I get depressed. Having something disrupt that feedback loop can be extremely beneficial.

Elevated mood being associated with exercise is well documented and was written about in a recent Starting Strength article, [\*The Prescription of Strength Training For Treating Depression And Optimizing Cognitive Performance\*](#).

Long term goals are made up of a series of short term goals. Depression is not conducive to short term goals, and by extension, not conducive to long term goals. Managing your depression will be crucial if you want to make long term strength progress. There are a few rules and concepts that I have learned through personal experience that may help you.

### Tricks of the Self-Flagellant

The same elements that drive compliance in a normal trainee will also drive compliance in a trainee with depression. Generally, the biggest problem with compliance is impulsive decision making. These methods attempt to set you up to take part of the impulsiveness out of the equation and keep things focused on training. They're not perfect, but they help.

## *Depression and Training*

**1. A training partner or coach (accountability)** – Having a training partner or coach will give you a sense of accountability: “I can sit here and blow off my friend and be an asshole, or I can get up, be true to my word, and go work out with him.”

**2. Caffeine** – Taking some caffeine can make you feel energetic enough to get going. It’s also well documented to improve force production. In all likelihood, you can do the workout. You just don’t feel motivated to do it and you feel weak. The main purpose of the caffeine is really just to get you to the gym and get through your first work set.

**3. Just get to the first work set** – If you can do your first work set, you’ve made it. You know you can do it. Don’t bullshit yourself. You just did the first work set, so finish the workout. Framing the workout in this manner can make the entire session seem less intimidating. It turns “How am I going to squat 315×5×5, then press 165×5, then clean 215×2×7?” into “All I have to do is squat 315×5, then I’ll decide if I want to do my entire workout or not.”

**4. Stay distracted during the workout** – Don’t think about whatever might be causing your depression or even the fact that you are depressed. Sometimes, the fact that there is no assignable cause for depression makes you more depressed. During the work sets, this isn’t a problem. The heaviest thing on Earth (in your mind) is crushing you into the ground, and you had better stand that sucker up and not die. The problem is the rest between sets. Bring a book. Draw. Talk to people. Anything to keep you out of your own head. You know your situation better than I do, so be smart about what you choose to do. If emails from your boss stress you out or you’re worried about a text from your ex-wife, leave your phone in your car.

**5. Train right after work** – You can use the inertia of work to your advantage. Instead of driving home, drive straight to the gym and work out. Even for normal trainees, this is helpful. You’re already out of the house (and off of the couch) and thinking industriously. If you go home and sit down, the idea of exerting yourself becomes a lot less palatable. Over time, lifting after work becomes an ingrained habit. Just like brushing your teeth before bed, it will become an unconscious reflex. This is exactly what you want if depressive inertia is the enemy.

## **Acute Episodes versus Generally Depressed Days**

If you have a day (or 2, or 11) when you just generally feel numb and unmotivated, you have to just suck it up and do your workouts. You’re not going to feel any better by skipping a day and waiting until tomorrow. This is basically the same as a non-depressed person thinking “Well, I don’t *feel* like it today, so I’ll just skip it.”

When you’re depressed, you might look for any excuse to stay on the couch. Don’t let this happen on the “generally depressed days”. However, if something acute happens, it may make sense to push a day back.

One day, your dad calls you 5 times in a row and you don’t answer. He leaves a message about why you didn’t come to visit him and your mom last weekend, and you don’t want to explain that you’re still hurt and angry that he was mentally absent for 6 important years of your childhood. Now, you can’t stop thinking about it and you cope the only way you’ve known how for your entire adult life: shut down and deaden yourself to the world.

## *Depression and Training*

This is an acute event, and it may be a good reason (not an *excuse*) to push your workout back a day. Use the time to reflect, figure yourself out, or just open up to your significant other. Listen to some Morrissey. Take time to feel normal again. “Push back” is not the same as “skip.” With the majority of programs, you can get away with making small modifications cycle to cycle and it won’t matter much, but it cannot become a habit. The longer the overload event and the stress/recovery/adaptation cycle, the less a small one-time modification matters. Novices cannot make nearly as many modifications as advanced trainees, primarily due to the percentage of change that occurs during the overload event – adding a rest day to a 100-day cycle is a 1% change, but adding a rest day to a 2-day cycle is a 50% change. Advanced trainees also know what they can get away with better than novices.

When you find yourself feeling you want to push back a workout, ask yourself if you’re really going to feel any different tomorrow. If the answer is “no” then just do the workout. You may surprise yourself with what you can accomplish even while compromised.

### **It’s Okay to Not Be “Fine”**

Perhaps the best advice I can offer is that, whatever the cause for your depression, dwelling on it won’t fix it. Your depression exists for a reason, whether you know it or not. Maybe your family abandoned you, and now you’re emotionally dead inside. Maybe you unintentionally convinced your girlfriend to kill herself, and the guilt haunts you. Maybe you got a dealt a shitty hand in the lottery, and it’s just a part of your brain chemistry. So, where do you go from here? Do you ball up in a corner and feel sorry for yourself? Or do you accept the situation you’re in and learn to deal with it? There’s one correct answer here.

I don’t mean that you need to put on a tough face and pretend nothing is wrong. It’s okay to not be “fine.” It’s okay that something is wrong. Everyone on this Earth has problems, and nobody should feel shame for trying to better themselves. Admitting you have a problem doesn’t make you a “special snowflake.” It doesn’t matter how rich, poor, intelligent, stupid, cared for, neglected, or gifted they are, everyone has had some messed-up stuff happen in their life.

Just like the weak fat guy that comes to the gym to become strong and healthy, anyone who mocks you for your problems while you’re trying to fix them is not worth your concern. Many people use the “car metaphor” for lifting. You would be stupid to not get the oil changed in your car or do preventative maintenance on it. Your body is even more important, because you only get one of them. The same is true of your mind. You only have one, and your mind influences everything you do in life.

Your depression may be sufficiently bad that you need external help. A good therapist and carefully prescribed SSRIs (anti-depressants) can help a great deal. The SSRIs are to handle the general feelings of depression, but there may be underlying issues that need to be fixed with a therapist. No different than a good coach, a good therapist is one that asks what your goals are and works toward those goals in a logical manner. Instead of being experts in coaching movement, therapists are experts in listening and coaching *thinking*. Depending on your geographic location (the mid-west US is especially bad for this), you may find that your therapy is something you’d like to hide. But just because someone is in therapy doesn’t mean they’re insane.

Therapy and anti-depressants might not be the best way for you to handle your depression. You may decide that good decisions and a lot of introspection may be the solution. Regardless of what you decide, you need to find a way to deal with it. I would not recommend my friend’s preferred method of dealing with acute depression: 2 sleeping pills, binge watching the entire series of *Scrubs*, and drinking a 6-pack of Hopslam before he passes out. Rather, take it one day at a time, keep the long term goal

## *Depression and Training*

in mind, and make incremental progress reaching milestones in thinking – yes, PRs – throughout the endeavor. Not just hide it or tough it out, but make progress toward resolving it. In this way, mental and intellectual aspirations progress similar to the strength training progression.

---

[Starting Strength](#) : [Articles](#) : [Videos](#) : [Podcasts](#) : [Training](#) : [Forums](#)

Copyright 2018 The Aasgaard Company. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by copyright law.