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Published in:

American Journal of Public Health

Publication status and date:

Published: 01/01/2015

DOI (link to publisher):

[10.1093/eurpub/ckv170.078](https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckv170.078)

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Citation for the published version (APA):

Woodend, A., Schölmerich, VLN., & Denktas, S. (2015). Preventing major depressive disorder: how behavioural economics can help. *American Journal of Public Health*, 25(3). <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckv170.078>

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4.M. Pitch Presentations: Mental health issues in Europe

Preventing major depressive disorder: how behavioural economics can help

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Major depressive disorder (MDD) – colloquially referred to as depression - is the second leading cause of disability-adjusted life years in developed countries. The disorder is highly prevalent, tends to be chronic or recurrent, and inflicts a burden on both the individual and the economy. Current preventive interventions, such as problem-solving therapy, are fairly effective but also expensive.

In this commentary, we discuss nudges as a cost-effective complementary strategy for preventing MDD. Derived from insights of behavioral economics, nudges adapt the way choices are presented to people by directly leveraging upon systematic cognitive biases that are related to (unhealthy) behavior. We explore how nudges could combat three behavioral risk factors for developing MDD: low physical activity, use of inappropriate coping mechanisms, and inadequate maintenance of social ties. These risk factors have been selected given their relatively high odds ratios for contributing to the onset of MDD – 2.1, 2.32, and 2.95, respectively. For each behavioral risk, we identify related biases and propose effective nudges.

Low physical activity is explained by the present bias – people value the present more than the future. A nudge leveraging upon this bias could use ‘temptation bundling’ for exercise adherence. The bandwagon effect and framing can also be used to promote physical activity using nudges that highlight the physical activity norm to those likely to be below it, and that make use of gain-framed as opposed to loss-framed messages.

In moving individuals away from inappropriate coping mechanisms, the salience hypothesis – i.e. people tend to choose the option that is most salient to them—could be leveraged by using highly visible posters encouraging individuals to seek out assistance in stressful situations. Finally, we suggest using the status quo bias (people prefer the way things are) in promoting the creation and maintenance of social ties, by choosing for open-offices in industries/firms characterized by little social interaction.

Key messages

- We identify 3 behavioral risks for major depression that could be prevented by nudges. By leveraging biases related to these risks (such as the status quo bias), we propose 5 nudging strategies
- We show how an examination of the current behavioral risks, their related biases, and available nudging interventions can lead to new intervention routes for preventing major depression