

## Bad day vs depression or burnout: what's the difference?

A **bad day** is usually:

- Triggered by something specific (argument, bad meeting, poor sleep).
- Short-lived – mood lifts within hours or a day or two.
- Annoying and draining, but you can still do essentials and occasionally enjoy things.
- Not accompanied by a big shift in how you see yourself (“I’m useless”, “Nothing will ever get better”).

By contrast, **depression** and **burnout** are more like a persistent state:

- Symptoms last **most of the day, nearly every day, for at least two weeks**.
- You notice **a consistent change from your usual self** across several areas of life.
- Your functioning is affected: work, study, relationships, self-care.
- You don’t “bounce back” after rest or a weekend off.

---

## What depression can look like

You might be experiencing depression rather than just a bad spell if, over two weeks or more, you notice:

- **Mood and interest**
  - Feeling low, empty, or numb most days.
  - Losing interest in things you usually enjoy (hobbies, socializing, food).
- **Energy, sleep, appetite**
  - Tired almost all the time.
  - Sleeping a lot more or less than usual, or waking very early.
  - Eating much more or less than your normal.
- **Thinking and self-talk**
  - Difficulty concentrating, making small decisions, or remembering things.
  - Harsh self-criticism, guilt, or shame (“I’m a failure”, “everyone would be better off without me”).

- Feeling hopeless – you can't imagine things improving.
- **Behavior and relationships**
  - Pulling back from people, ignoring calls and messages.
  - Struggling with basic tasks: showering, getting dressed, cooking, and paying bills.

If several of these are true **most days for two weeks**, that's more than "just a bad period" and deserves a proper assessment.

---

### What burnout can look like

Burnout is usually tied to **chronic stress in a role** (work, caregiving, study). Signs include:

- **Exhaustion that doesn't shift** – you feel depleted even after sleep or time off.
- **Cynicism and detachment** – you dread work, feel irritable or emotionally flat, and care less than you used to.
- **Reduced performance** – concentration dips, mistakes increase, tasks feel heavier and take longer.

You might still enjoy parts of life outside that role (family, hobbies), which can distinguish burnout from more global depression. But burnout can slide into depression if nothing changes.

---

### Simple self-check: questions to ask yourself

You could sit down with a notebook and honestly answer:

1. **How long has this been going on?**
  - A day or two after a clear trigger → more likely a bad patch.
  - Two weeks or more, with no clear improvement → time to take it seriously.
2. **Has my enjoyment changed?**
  - Can I still enjoy *anything* sometimes, even briefly?
  - Or does everything feel flat, pointless, or like "too much"?
3. **What has changed in my daily functioning?**

- Am I struggling with basics like washing, cooking, replying to messages, and focusing on simple tasks?
- Have others noticed I'm "not myself"?

#### 4. What does my inner voice sound like?

- Stressed and annoyed?
- Or consistently harsh, hopeless, and self-attacking?

#### 5. Do I have thoughts of not wanting to be here?

- Any recurrent thoughts that life is not worth living or that others would be better off without you are **not** "just a bad day". They are a clear signal to get urgent support.

---

### When to seek help

You don't need to wait until you "tick every box". You should **reach out to a professional** (GP, psychiatrist, psychologist, counselor) if:

- Symptoms have persisted **most days for 2+ weeks**, or
- They are **getting worse**, or
- They are starting to affect work, family, or safety.

Treat it as **urgent** (same day/emergency care) if:

- You are unable to care for yourself (not eating, washing, or leaving bed for days).
- You have active thoughts of harming yourself or ending your life, or have started to make plans.
- You are using a lot of alcohol or drugs to cope.

In those situations, skip self-monitoring and seek immediate help.

---

### What you can do right now

If you're reading this and thinking "this might be me", a few concrete steps:

- **Write down** your symptoms and how long they've been present.
- **Book an appointment** with your mental health professional or GP; bring your notes. (In Hong Kong, you must go to a GP first and get a referral)
- **Tell one trusted person** what's going on – a partner, friend, or family member.

- **Dial down load** where you can in the short term: say no, defer non-urgent tasks, build in rest.