

# DEPRESSION AND LOW MOOD

A self help guide







# DEPRESSION AND LOW MOOD

## A self help guide

These are the thoughts of two people who are depressed:

*“I feel so alone, I never see my friends now, I guess they have dropped me. They probably don’t like me – who would? There is no point in making any effort. It doesn’t pay off... I just hate myself.”*

*“I feel like crying all the time, I am so tired and can’t get interested in anything. In fact I don’t even get started with jobs I should be doing, I can’t even do basic things that seem so easy to other people...”*

You may have had similar thoughts yourself. Depression is a very common problem and many people feel low or down in the dumps at times. This is often due to life stresses such as bereavement, money or housing problems or difficulties in relationships. For some people the problem becomes much worse and gets in the way of normal life.



## How can this guide help me?

It may seem that nothing can be done to help you feel better. But there are things that you can do to make a difference. There is also further help you can get if the depression does not seem to be getting any better.

This guide aims to help you cope with depression and begin to get better. The approach is called Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT uses methods that have been tried and tested and found to be effective. It involves looking at the way you think about things.

We have included pen and paper exercises in the booklet to help you begin to understand and begin to deal with depression practically. You should find it helpful to complete these exercises.

For more general information on depression see our booklet **‘Depression – an information booklet’**.

## What does research tell us about depression?

Life is sometimes difficult and we know that factors such as low income, divorce or relationship problems and loss of work can make people more likely to become depressed. New research has helped us to understand depression more clearly. We now realise that thoughts can also play an important role in depression. Changes in feelings may occur gradually, but the way a person thinks about themselves when they are depressed is very different from how they thought before. Perhaps you can think about some examples of depressed thinking in yourself or in someone you know who has depression.

Here are a few examples:

- The successful business man who believes he is on the brink of bankruptcy.

- 
- The caring mother who thinks she has lost interest in her children.
  - The clever student who thinks he can't concentrate and is stupid.
  - The hard working man who thinks that he is useless because he has lost his job.

People who are depressed typically have such thoughts and at the time they believe them to be true. When someone's thoughts change like this, they also begin to experience other changes.

### **These are some of the signs or symptoms that you may experience if you are depressed:**

#### **Emotions or feelings** (tick if you feel like this)

- Feeling sad, guilty, upset, numb or despairing
- Losing interest and/or enjoyment in things
- Crying a lot or unable to cry when a truly sad event occurs
- Feeling alone even if you are in company
- Feeling angry and irritable about the slightest thing.

#### **Physical or Bodily Signs**

- Tiredness
- Lack of energy
- Restlessness
- Sleep problems
- Feeling worse at a particular time of day - usually mornings
- Changes in weight, appetite and eating.



## Thoughts

- Losing confidence in yourself
- Expecting the worst and having negative or gloomy thoughts
- Thinking that everything seems hopeless
- Thinking you hate yourself
- Poor memory or concentration
- Thoughts of suicide

## Behaviour

- Having difficulty in making decisions
- Can't be bothered to do everyday tasks
- Putting things off
- Not doing things you used to enjoy
- Cutting yourself off from other people

If you have ticked many of these boxes then you may be experiencing low mood or depression.

When you're depressed you may believe that you're helpless and alone in the world; you often blame yourself for all the shortcomings that you think you have. At the bottom of all this you feel negative about yourself, about the world and about the future. So you tend to lose interest in what's going on around you and you don't get any satisfaction out of the things you used to enjoy. It can become hard to make decisions or to carry out little tasks that you once did with no problem at all.

## In Summary

Research now tells us that gloomy thoughts play an important role in depression. When someone is depressed there are usually



changes in the way they feel – their emotions, how their body reacts, what they think and how they behave.

## **How can I understand these feelings?**

The way you think about things affects the way you feel, which affects the way you behave. It is difficult to change the way you feel, but you can change the way you think.

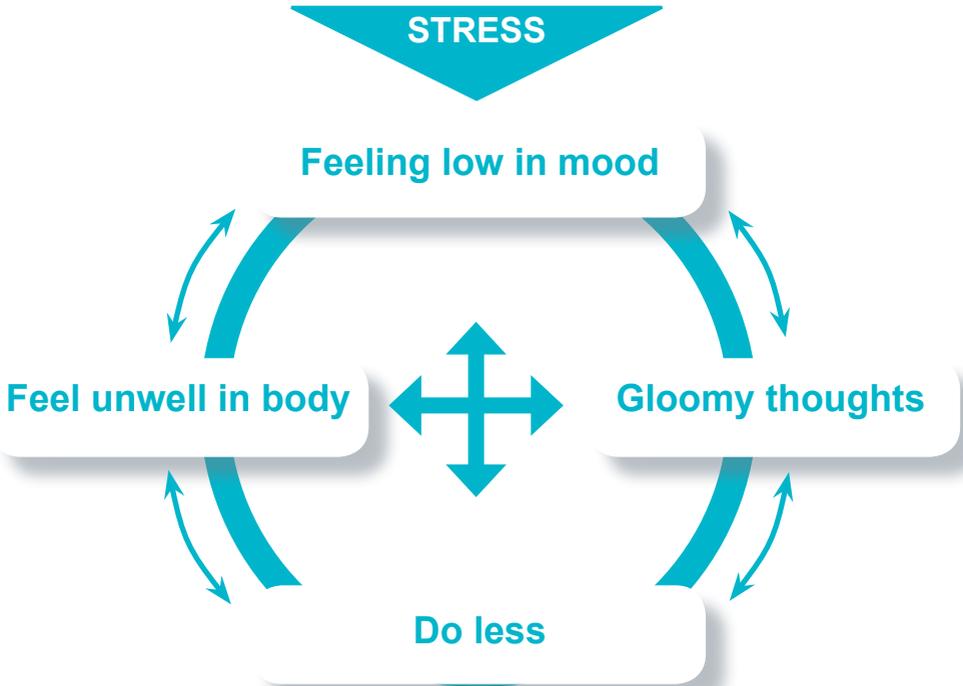
When you are feeling depressed you might have negative thoughts a lot of the time. With each negative thought the feelings of depression are likely to increase.

Sometimes negative thoughts can stop you from doing the things that you would normally do. As a result, you may get critical thoughts about being lazy, or irresponsible, which make you feel even worse. In other words, you get caught up in a vicious cycle.

### **For example:**

Suppose you are walking down the street and you see a friend who appears to ignore you completely. You might wonder why your friend has turned against you and you feel a little sad. Later on, you mention the incident to your friend, who tells you that he was preoccupied at the time and he didn't even see you. Normally you would feel better and put what happened out of your mind. But if you're depressed, you probably believe your friend has rejected you. You may not even ask him about the incident, and then the mistake goes uncorrected. If you're feeling depressed you're more likely to make mistakes like this over and over again.

The vicious cycle can look like this:



Has a similar cycle happened to you? Try and draw it out.

## Can I recognise these gloomy thoughts?

When you are feeling low the gloomy thoughts may be so familiar and happen so often to you that you just accept them as fact.

Gloomy thoughts are often about yourself; for example:

“I’m no good”  
“People don’t like me”  
“I’m a bad mixer”  
“I look ugly”



These thoughts are sometimes about other things such as the world around you or the future.

For example:



“People are unkind”  
“The world is a horrible place”  
“Nothing will work out well”

## What more should I know about these gloomy negative thoughts?

We have given examples of the negative thoughts people have when they are depressed. It is important to remember that you might still occasionally have some of these sorts of thoughts when you are not depressed. The difference is that you would generally



dismiss them from your mind. When you are depressed, however, these thoughts are around all the time. Let's look at these negative thoughts in more detail:

1. Negative thoughts tend to be automatic. They are not actually arrived at on the basis of reason and logic, they just seem to pop up out of the blue.
2. Often the thoughts are unreasonable, and unrealistic. They serve no purpose. All they do is make you feel bad and they get in the way of what you really want out of life. If you think about them carefully, you will probably find that you have jumped to a conclusion which is not necessarily correct. For example, thinking someone doesn't like you because they haven't phoned recently.
3. Even though these thoughts are unreasonable they probably seem believable and correct to you at the time.
4. The more you believe and accept negative thoughts, the worse you are likely to feel. If you allow yourself to get into the grip of these thoughts, you find you are viewing everything in a negative way.

When people become depressed their thinking often changes. They may have some of the following unhelpful thinking styles when they are feeling depressed:

### **1. Exaggerating the negative**

This means we think things are much worse than they really are. For example you make a small mistake at work and fear that you may be dismissed because of it. In other words you jump to a gloomy conclusion and believe that it is likely to happen, or you may spend a long time worrying that you have upset a friend only to find later she didn't even remember the comment.

**Do you ever exaggerate the negative?** Think back over the last two weeks and list:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

## 2. Overgeneralising

This is when we generalise from one small thing. For example, if one person doesn't get on with you, you may think "no one likes me" or if one of your many daily tasks hasn't been finished you think "I've achieved nothing – nothing has been done".

In other words from one thing that has happened to you, you draw a negative conclusion which is much bigger and covers all sorts of things.

**Do you ever overgeneralise?** Think back over the last two weeks and list examples:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....



### 3. Ignoring the positive

People who are depressed tend to focus their thinking on negative or bad events and ignore positive or good events. For example, you might have had a game of pool and missed the shot once, but played well in general. After the game you just think about that one missed shot and not the rest of the game played well, or you may have many good friends who you have known for years but you concentrate and worry about one that has fallen out with you rather than remembering all the other good friendships.

**Do you sometimes ignore the positive?** Jot down some examples from the last two weeks:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

### 4. Taking things personally

Often if our mood is low we blame ourselves for anything which goes wrong, even if things have nothing to do with us in reality. For example, you go into a local shop and the assistant who knows you is 'off-hand', your automatic thought is "she doesn't like me... have I done something wrong?", but the most likely reason is that she's tired or upset or has had a 'bad day'. In this example you have taken the blame personally.

**Do you sometimes take things personally when they probably have little to do with you?** Give examples from the last two weeks:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

### **In Summary**

When people are depressed they often have unhelpful thinking styles, leading to gloomy or unhelpful thoughts about themselves, the world and the future. They exaggerate the negative, overgeneralise bad events, ignore positives in their lives and can take things personally. It is important to uncover gloomy thoughts and unhelpful thinking styles.

### **How can I help myself?**

So far we have talked about how what we think affects the way we feel. We have looked at particular ways of thinking which can lead to us getting depressed. In this section we will look at practical steps to help to overcome depressive feelings and thoughts. Research evidence tells us that increased activity is very helpful in overcoming depression.

## Positive steps

- List things to do
- Mix with people
- Join in activities
- Take exercise
- Do things you enjoy.



## 1. Making a daily plan

When people are depressed they often don't feel like doing anything, find it hard to decide what to do each day and can end up doing very little.

Begin to tackle this by making a list of things you want to do. Then plan out an action list, start off with the easiest task at first and don't aim too high. Work through your action list and tick off what you've done. At the end of the day you'll be able to look back and see what you've achieved. Physical exercise and activity can really help to lift your mood. Try and build a little in each day. Mixing with friends, family and neighbours can also help.

**List some exercises or activities which you could do.** This can be as simple as a brisk walk; or doing a crossword with a member of your family:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Try to fill in this action plan – continue with similar plans

	<b>Mon</b>	<b>Tues</b>	<b>Wed</b>	<b>Thurs</b>	<b>Fri</b>	<b>Sat</b>	<b>Sun</b>
9am - 11am							
11am - 1pm							
1pm - 3pm							
3pm - 5pm							
5pm - 7pm							



## 2. Achievements and pleasure

When people are depressed they often forget what they've achieved and what they enjoy. Most people have more things going for them than they are usually aware of. On your daily action plan write down all events of the day, put a 'P' next to those which have given you pleasure and an 'A' next to those activities where you felt you achieved something and did well. Try not to be too modest; people who are depressed tend not to take credit for their achievements. Try and build some pleasant events into your day each day - treat yourself, it will help you.

## 3. The ABC of changing feelings

Most people who are depressed think their lives are so awful that they have every right to feel sad. In fact our feelings come from what we think about and how we make sense of what has happened to us.

Try to think about a recent event which had upset and depressed you. You should be able to sort out three parts of it:

- A. The event.
- B. Your thoughts about it.
- C. Your feelings about it.

Most people are normally only aware of A and C. Let's look at an example:

Suppose someone at work criticises you for a piece of work you have done.

- A. The event – criticism of your work.
- B. Your thoughts – what are you thinking about? You may need to concentrate to discover this.

“He thinks I’m no good,  
and he’s right, I’m hopeless”

C. Your feelings – hurt, embarrassed.

How depressing! No wonder you feel bad! The important point about trying to become aware of these three stages A, B and C is that we can change what we think about an event and therefore we can change how we feel about it.

## 4. Balancing

A useful technique to try is called balancing. When you have a negative, critical thought, balance it out by making a more accurate and positive statement to yourself. For example:

The thought: “I’m no good at my job”, could be balanced with: “my boss said how much he appreciated the piece of work I did yesterday”.



## 5. The double column technique

Another thing you could do is write down your negative automatic thoughts in one column – and, opposite each one, write down a more balanced positive thought. Like this:

Negative automatic thoughts	Balancing thoughts
John hasn't called, he doesn't like me.	He is very busy and thinks I am doing better than I was last week, so he doesn't need to worry about me.

Later, it may be helpful to keep a diary of events, feelings and thoughts.

Try to keep a diary of events, feelings and thoughts. It may look a bit like the table below. Use the approaches described to gain more balanced thoughts. Look out for unhelpful thinking styles.

Event	Feeling or emotion	Thoughts in your mind	Other more balanced thoughts
<b>Example</b>			
A neighbour ignored me	Low and depressed	She doesn't like me, no one does.	She's probably got something on her mind – I am jumping to a conclusion that she doesn't like me.
<b>Your Example</b>			



## 6. Try and remember details

Research tells us that the person who is depressed doesn't remember details of events but tends to think in general statements, such as "I've never been any good at anything". Try and train yourself to remember specific details so that good times and experiences are easy to recall. A daily diary can help you to do this. Make lists of actual achievements and good aspects of yourself such as "I'm always on time", "I helped my friend on Tuesday" or "My partner complimented me on my work last week". Listing past achievements and pleasurable activities in detail can also be helpful.

### In Summary

Using a daily plan, mastery and achievement notes and keeping a diary of automatic thoughts and more balanced thoughts can help you to fight depression and the gloomy thoughts that go with it.

## 7. Solving difficult problems

Sometimes we feel overwhelmed by the very complicated and difficult things we have to do. One thing which helps with this sort of problem is to write down each of the steps which you have to take in order to complete the job – then tackle one step at a time.

Problem solving can seem more difficult when you feel depressed. If you have a particularly difficult problem, try and look back to times when you may have successfully solved similar problems and use the same approach. Or ask a friend what they would do in a similar situation. Be clear. Write down all your possible options. Use 'brainstorming' – where even apparently silly solutions are written down to be considered. Choose the best approach.

• • • ————— • • •

**Try this way of problem solving yourself.**

**What is the problem?** Write it down - be as specific as possible:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

**Try the following:**

List all sorts of solutions (brainstorming). Remember how you may have solved similar problems in the past. What would your friends advise? Or how would you advise a friend with a similar problem?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

**Choose the best of the above.** (Write it down)

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

**Steps to tackle it:** (Write it down)

Step 1: .....

Step 2: .....

Step 3: .....

Step 4: .....

Step 5: .....

## 8. Long term beliefs

Sometimes people have long held views about themselves that are very self critical – for example, “I’m not a very clever person” or “I’m not a very lovable person”. These beliefs are often a product of our past experience and may hold no truth in present reality. Try to challenge this self criticism, stop knocking yourself down and look for evidence that disproves the beliefs. What would you say to a good friend if they held that belief about themselves?

## 9. Particularly stressful times

Many people experience a difficult time in their lives which can be linked with events that they cannot change, for example bereavement, or several bereavements over a short period, unemployment, longstanding illness, chronic financial problems or isolation. Sometimes several of these events happen together and depression can result. In time, most people bounce back, but it may be hard to do this without help.



## 10. Further help

We hope you will use the exercises suggested in this booklet. They should help you to begin to overcome your depression and get back in control of your thoughts and your life.

If you feel that you are making little progress then other help is available to aid you in overcoming your problem.

Your family doctor is the best person to talk to first. They may suggest a talking treatment or antidepressant tablets or both. They may suggest you see a mental health worker who can offer expert help with your problems. If you feel so depressed that thoughts of harming yourself have been in your mind then visit your doctor as soon as possible and talk about how you are feeling.

### **Where can I find extra help?**

If you think you may be depressed, your GP is the best person to talk to in the first instance. They will have information about local services which may be able to help. Help may also be obtained from your practice nurse or health visitor based at your GP practice.

## Useful organisations and helplines:

### Local

- **Action Mental Health (Portadown)**

Tel: 028 3839 2314

*(Incorporating Menssana - promotion of positive mental health for young people).*

- **Aware Defeat Depression**

Tel: 028 9032 1734

Website: [www.aware-ni.org](http://www.aware-ni.org)

*Supports those affected by bi polar disorder / depression.*

- **CRUSE Bereavement Care**

**Bereavement line:** 0844 477 9400

**Armagh and Dungannon:** 028 8778 4004

**Newry and Mourne:** 028 3025 2322

Website: [www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

*Offers advice and support for those affected by bereavement. Helpline for bereaved people and carers.*

- **Lifeline**

Tel: 0808 808 8000 Text phone for hard of hearing: 18001 0808 808 8000

Website: [www.lifelinehelpline.info](http://www.lifelinehelpline.info)

*Lifeline Counsellors are available 24hrs a day to offer support for those in distress.*

- **Mindwise**

Website: [www.mindwisenv.org](http://www.mindwisenv.org)

**Banbridge** Tel: 028 4066 9402

**Lurgan** Tel: 028 3832 9492

**Newry** Tel: 028 3026 1093

**Portadown** Tel: 028 3026 1093

- **Northern Ireland Agoraphobia and Anxiety Society**

Tel: 08451 228625

*Counselling, advice and support for people who suffer from phobias, panic attacks and anxieties.*

- **Northern Ireland Association of Mental Health (NIAMH)**

Tel: 028 9032 8474

Website: [niamhwellbeing.org](http://niamhwellbeing.org)

*Mental health and wellbeing for all.*

- **Relate NI**

Tel: 028 9032 3454

Helpline: 0870 2426091

Website: [www.relateni.org](http://www.relateni.org)

3 Glengall Street, Belfast BT12 5AB

*Help with marital or relationship problems.*

*Services available in the Southern Trust area.*



- **Rural Support**

Helpline: 0845 606 7607

Website: [www.ruralsupport.org.uk](http://www.ruralsupport.org.uk)

*The organisation provides support on a range of issues through a helpline which offers a listening and signposting service for farmers and rural families.*

- **Samaritans**

Helpline: 0845 790 9090

Website: [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

*Confidential support for anyone in a crisis.*

## National

- **Mind Infoline**

Tel: 0300 123 3393

Website: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

*Provides information on a range of topics including types of mental distress, where to get help, drug and alternative treatments and advocacy. Also provides details of help and support for people in their own area.*

Helpline available Mon - Fri, 9am - 5pm.

- **NHS Choices – Your health – your choices**

Website: [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

*Information about conditions, treatments, local services and healthy lives.*

- **Young Minds**

Tel: 020 7336 8445

Website: [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

*A national organisation committed to improving the mental health of all children and young people under 25 years of age.*

## Further Reading:

- **Feeling Good: the new mood therapy**

David Burns; HarperCollins 2000

*A drug-free guide to curing anxiety, guilt, pessimism, procrastination, low self-esteem and other depressive disorders - uses scientifically tested methods to improve mood and stave off the blues.*

- **Overcoming Depression**

Paul Gilbert; Constable and Robinson 2000

*A self-help guide using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques, this book is full of step-by-step suggestions, case examples and practical ideas for gaining control over depression and low mood.*

- **Dealing with Depression**

Kathy Nairne and Gerrilyn Smith; The Women's Press 2001

*This is a practical guide for sufferers of depression and those who know someone who is depressed. It identifies the causes of depression and the many forms it may take, explores ways of coping and recovering, and evaluates the help available.*

- **Depression: the way out of your prison**

Dorothy Rowe; Taylor and Francis 2003

*Gives us a way of understanding our depression which matches our experience and which enables us to take charge of our life and change it.*

- **Mind over Mood**

Christine Pradesky and Dennis Greenberger; Guilford 1995

*Draws on the authors' extensive experience as clinicians and teachers of cognitive therapy to help clients successfully understand and improve their moods, alter their behaviour, and enhance their relationships.*

- **Overcoming Depression and Low Mood - a five areas approach**

Christopher Williams; Hodder Education 2006

*Overcoming Depression and Low Mood is a series of short self-help workbooks for use by people experiencing low mood and depression. Developed in liaison with a wide range of experts, the course provides access to the proven Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) approach. Providing accessible information and teaching key life skills the workbooks provide a practical and effective way of improving how you feel.*

- **Anxiety and Depression: a practical guide to recovery**

Robert Priest; Ebury Pres 1996

*Robert Priest has written this book especially to provide help for those feeling anxious and depressed. In particular, he covers the practical self-help methods to reduce stress and offers an explanation of the causes and effects of anxiety and depression.*



## 10. Further help

We hope you will use the exercises suggested in this booklet. They should help you to begin to overcome your depression and get back in control of your thoughts and your life.

If you feel that you are making little progress then other help is available to aid you in overcoming your problem.

Your family doctor is the best person to talk to first. They may suggest a talking treatment or antidepressant tablets or both. They may suggest you see a mental health worker who can offer expert help with your problems. If you feel so depressed that thoughts of harming yourself have been in your mind then visit your doctor as soon as possible and talk about how you are feeling.

### **Where can I find extra help?**

If you think you may be depressed, your GP is the best person to talk to in the first instance. They will have information about local services which may be able to help. Help may also be obtained from your practice nurse or health visitor based at your GP practice.





**Written by Dr Lesley Maunder and Lorna Cameron,  
Consultant Clinical Psychologists, Northumberland, Tyne and  
Wear NHS Foundation Trust.**

**This leaflet is based on material produced by  
Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust  
([www.ntw.nhs.uk](http://www.ntw.nhs.uk)). © 2012 Reproduced by permission.**