

# Depression and Low Mood

A self help guide

Shining a light on the future



**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 therapy. Cognitive therapy 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 brief leaflet ‘Understanding and Coping with Depression’

## **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 of our examples:

- The 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.
- The ordinary man who thinks that he is useless because he has lost his job.

People who are depressed typically have these 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 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 things

### **Physical or Bodily Signs**

- Tiredness
- Restless
- 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

## Behaviour

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

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.

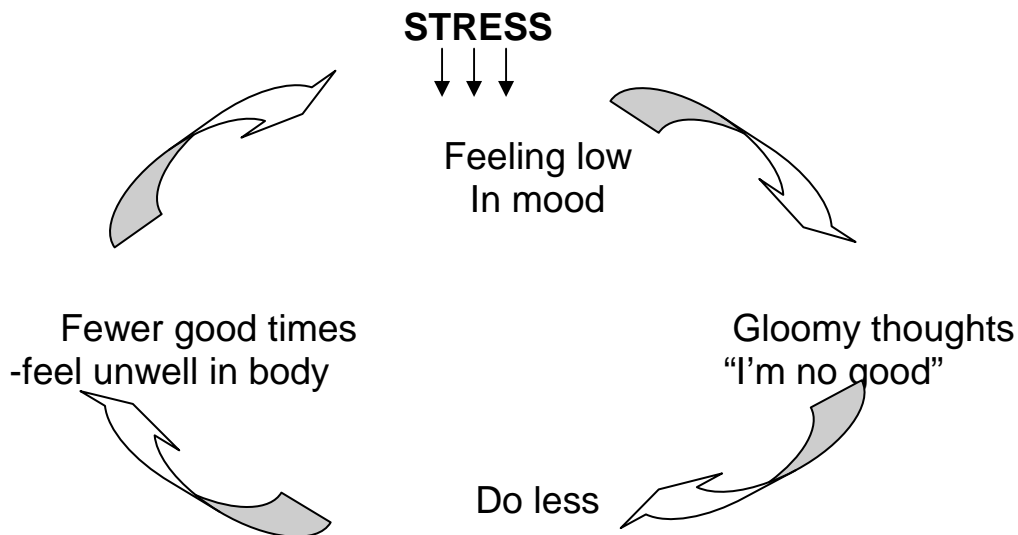
Sometimes negative thoughts can stop you from doing the things that you would normally do. As a result, you may get critical thoughts about being lazy, or irresponsible which make you feel even worse. In other words, you get caught up in a **vicious cycle**.

## 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".

Do you have any gloomy thoughts about yourself? - Jot them down:

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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".

Do you have any gloomy thoughts about other things? - Jot them down.

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## 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 happen.
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 reasonable** 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 make some of the following errors when they are thinking negatively:

### 1. Exaggerating the negative

This means you 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. 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 2 weeks and please list:

### 2. Overgeneralising

For example, if one person doesn't get on with you, you may think "no one likes me". If one of your many daily tasks hasn't been finished you think "no one likes me". For example, if one person doesn't get on with you, you may think "no one likes me". "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 2 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. You might have had a game of football and missed the goal 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. 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 examples from the last 2 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 some examples from the last 2 weeks:

### **In Summary**

When people are depressed they often have gloomy or unhelpful thoughts about themselves, the world and the future. They can also make errors in the way they think. 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 errors in thinking.

### **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.

#### **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 exercise 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 ones

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
9.00am – 11.00 pm					
11.00am – 1.00pm					
1.00pm – 3.00pm					
3.00pm – 5.00pm					
5.00 pm – 7.00pm					

## 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.  
You may feel hurt and embarrassed.
- B. Your thoughts - "He thinks I'm no good at my job, and he's right I'm hopeless, I shouldn't be in this job".
- C. Your feelings - hurt, embarrassed.  
But what are you thinking about? You may need to concentrate to discover this.

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 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 right down your negative automatic thoughts in one column - and, opposite each one, write down a more balanced positive

thought. Like this:

<p><b>Negative automatic thought:</b></p> <p>John hasn't called, he doesn't love me.</p>	<p><b>Balancing thoughts:</b></p> <p>He is very busy and thinks I am doing better than I was last week, so he doesn't need to worry about me.</p>
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## 6. Try and remember details

Research tells us that the person who is depressed doesn't remember detail 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 details so that good times and experiences are easy to recall. Think of particular times. 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", "My partner complimented me on my work last week".

Try to keep a diary of events, feelings and thought. It may look a bit like the table on page 13. Use the approaches described to gain more balanced thoughts. Look out for errors in thinking.

Event	Feeling or emotion	Thoughts in your mind	Other more balanced thoughts
Example			
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.
Your example			

### 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 particular 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):

**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?

Choose the best of the above. (write it down):

**Steps to tackle it:**

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 that is linked with events that they cannot change. For example, a 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 control over 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. He may suggest a talking treatment or antidepressant tablets or both. He 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 tell him 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 can be obtained from your practice nurse or health visitor who is based at your GP practice.

## **The following organisations and help lines may also be useful:**

- **Association for Post Natal Illness** - for women who are experiencing depression following the birth of their baby  
145 Dawes Road, London, SE6 7EB Tel: 0207 386 0868

- **CRUSE Bereavement Line** - help line for bereaved people and those caring for bereaved people. Tel: 0870 167 1677
- **Mind InfoLine**  
Mon-Fri 9.15am - 5.15pm Tel: 0845 766 0163  
National Debt Line. Help for anyone in debt or concerned they may fall into debt. Tel: 0645 500 511 (local call rate).
- **Relate Northumberland and Tyneside** - help with marital or relationship problems, Mea House, Ellison Place, Newcastle Tel: 0191 232 9109
- **Samaritans Linkline** (local rate).  
Tel: 0345 909 090 Confidential support for anyone in a crisis.
- **Family Link** – a befriending scheme offering support and a practical approach to families with young children. Tel: 0191 232 3741
- **NHS Direct** - Telephone Helpline/Health Information Service. Talk confidentially to a nurse or information officer. Calls charged at local rate: Tel: 0845 4647

## Some useful books which you may like to buy or borrow from your local library:

- **Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy.** David Burns. New American Library, New York (1980).
- **Overcoming Depression.** Paul Gilbert (1999).
- **Dealing with Depression.** Kathy Naime and Gerrilyn Smith. The Women's Press (1994)
- **Depression: The Way Out of Your Prison.** Dorothy Rowe. Routledge (1993).
- **Mind over Mood.** Christine Padesky and Dennis Greenberger Guilford (1995)

This booklet, written by Lorna Cameron and Leslie Maunder, has been developed from an earlier manual by Sheila Sharkey and Kevin Gibson.

**This leaflet can be made available in a range of formats on request (E.g. Braille, audio, large print). Please contact the Patient Information Centre on Tel: 0191 223 2545**

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