



For better
mental health

Sunderland Mind

Depression and Low Mood

A self help guide

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. **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.

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.

Emotions or feelings

- 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 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.

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.

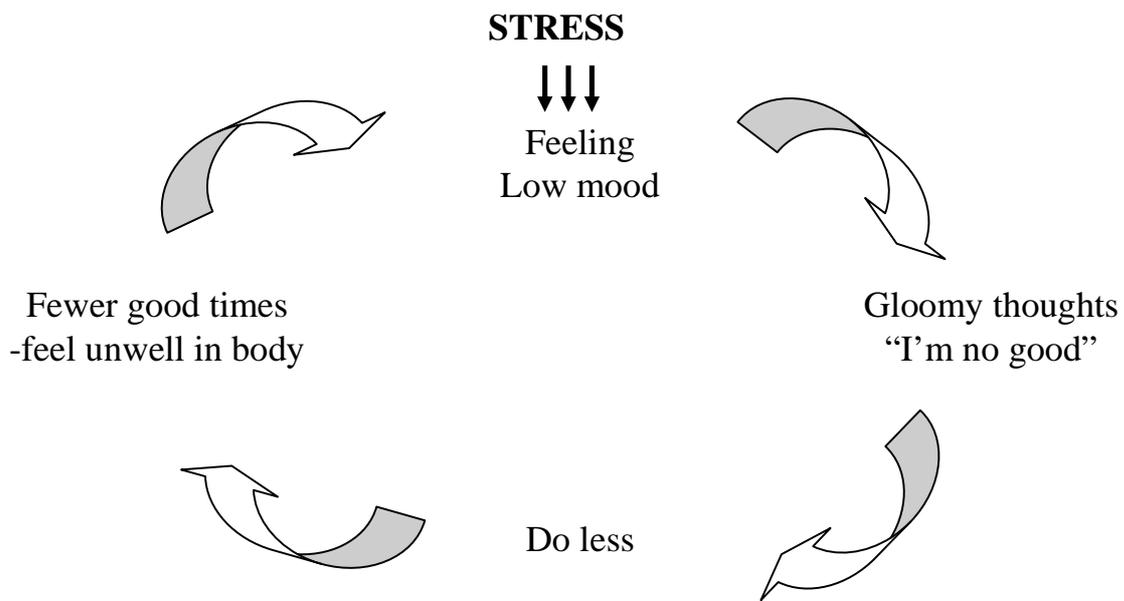
When you are feeling depressed you might have negative thoughts a lot of the time. With each negative thought the feelings of depression are likely to increase.

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.



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.

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.

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 for example, if one person doesn't get on with you, you may think "no one "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:

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. 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 – treat yourself, it will help you.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.

Try to keep a diary of events, feelings and thought.

6. 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.

7. Long term beliefs

Sometimes people have long held views about themselves that are very self critical. 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?

8. 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.