# Depression self-help guide

## 1. Introduction

This self-help guide is intended for people with mild-to-moderate symptoms of depression. If you are feeling distressed, in a state of despair, suicidal or need emotional support you can phone Samaritans for free on 116 123.

If you're ill and feel it can't wait until your GP practice reopens you can phone the NHS 24 111 service. For an emergency ambulance phone 999.

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This self-help guide aims to help you:

- find out if you could have symptoms of depression
- understand more about depression
- find ways to overcome depression

This guide is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). CBT helps you to examine how you think about your life, and challenge negative automatic thoughts to free yourself from unhelpful thought and behaviour patterns.

**How to use the depression self-help guide**

Working through this guide can take around 30 to 40 minutes, but you should feel free to work at your own pace.

To type in a graphic or diary, click or tap the part you'd like to fill in and use your keyboard as usual.

You can save and print this PDF guide on your device at any time.

# 2. Symptoms of depression

### Do I have symptoms of depression?

- Are you often low for most of the day?
- Are you less motivated to do things you'd usually enjoy?
- Do you often feel weepy or irritable?
- Do you feel worthless?

If you answered 'yes' to any of these questions, you might have symptoms of depression.

### Other symptoms of depression

**Thoughts you might have**

- "No one likes me"
- "I'm useless"
- "I'm a failure"
- "Things will never change"
- "I just want to die"
- "I can't go on like this"

**Feelings you might have**

- Sad
- Irritable
- Lonely
- Empty
- No interest
- No pleasure

**Things you might do**

- Stop doing things you enjoy
- Cry more easily
- Spend more time alone
- Stay in bed a lot
- Wake up very early in the morning and then can’t get back to sleep

**How your body might feel**

- Can’t concentrate
- Trouble remembering things
- Never hungry, or always hungry
- Exhausted
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Not interested in sex

## 3. What is depression?

Everyone feels a bit sad from time to time – depression is a more serious form of this. If you have depression these feelings can last most of each day, for a noticeable period of time – for example, a couple of weeks. It's more than just feeling down or in a low mood.

These thoughts can be about yourself, other people, and how you think other people feel about you, as well as the world around you and what's coming in the future.

**People who are depressed usually think negatively about:**

**Themselves:**

- I'm worthless
- I'm a failure
- I'm not good enough

**Others:**

- No one likes me
- Other people are better than me

**The future:**

- Things will never get better
- Everything's pointless

**The world:**

- The world is against me
- The world is a bad place

## 4. What causes depression?

People can feel depressed for lots of reasons - or you might not know what the reason is right now.

**Psychological**

- Negative thoughts about yourself, other people and the world
- Early life experiences

**Social**

Difficult experiences like:

- losing a loved one
- being bullied
- relationship problems

**Biological**

If a parent or close relative has experienced depression, there could be more of a chance that you'll experience depression yourself.

## 5. What keeps depression going? Activity 1

The things you think, feel, and do when you're depressed can actually keep depression going.

Depression can make you feel like you've wasted the day. When you're depressed, you might end up staying in bed all day, leaving you feeling more tired and like you haven't achieved anything.

**Activity 1**

Now fill in the boxes below about a situation when you felt depressed. Filling this in helps you see how your feelings, thoughts, behaviour and how your body feels are all linked, and can all affect each other.

If you'd like to review your answers with anyone or share the guide once you've completed it you should save this file after completing the graphic.

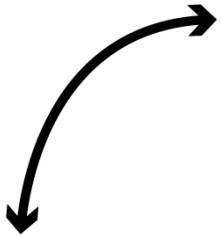
**Describe the situation. You could write where you were, who you were with, and what was happening. For example, "I was at a party with a group of people I didn't know."**

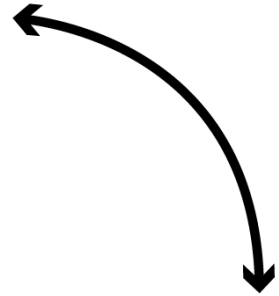
**Your thoughts - for example, "no one wants to talk to me."**

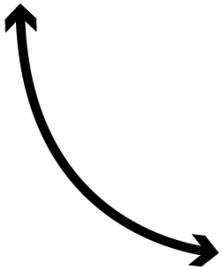
**Your feelings - for example, "alone, uncomfortable, scared, embarrassed."**

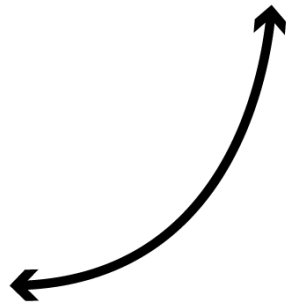
**How your body felt - for example, "too hot, sweaty, shaky."**

**What you did - for example, "I hid in the corner."**









## 6. How can I manage my depression?

### Changing behaviour

When you feel depressed, you often have less motivation to do things, and stop doing things you used to enjoy. It can be hard to get going and make plans with other people again.

It's good to reach out to friends and loved ones when you're feeling low, as this can help you to avoid feeling alone. However, it's also important to take time out for 'self-care'. This means focusing on yourself and your own happiness for a little while, and doing things that make you feel good. Self-care could mean treating yourself to an activity or food you like, or just setting aside time to relax. For example, you could go for a walk, take a hot bath, or just settle in and watch your favourite film.

By using a planner to plan your time in advance, you might be able to do more of what you enjoy, or have enjoyed in the past. This can improve your mood and how you feel about yourself. You could do a web search for events happening in your area and see if there's anything you'd be interested in.

Just remember it's important to pace yourself – you don't have to do everything at once.

## 7. Activity 2

Try to complete a plan for 3 days. You don't have to fill in every space, or complete it all at once. The planner can be quite flexible – it's okay for plans to change.

**In your planner, you could include:**

- one or two things that you used to enjoy
- something with other people – maybe an activity with friends
- exercise – something you've enjoyed in the past, like an exercise class
- things you have to do – like looking after yourself, making meals, and medical appointments
- a regular time to get up and go to bed – a regular sleeping pattern will make you feel better

You will find a planner to fill out below. If you save this file after filling out the boxes, you'll be able to go back and review the planner later.

**Please note:** if you use an iPhone, the only way to edit the planner is by using a PDF app on your device.

| | Day 1 | Day 2 | Day 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Morning** | | | |
| **Afternoon** | | | |
| **Evening** | | | |

## 8. Negative automatic thoughts

Negative automatic thoughts are unhelpful thoughts that pop into your mind, without you making any effort to think of them. They're believable and usually upsetting – this can affect your mood and what you do.

It's important to remember that a thought isn't necessarily a fact, or based on reality. You might believe the negative unhelpful thoughts that pop into your mind, but it's actually important to question them. They can be based on unhelpful assumptions.

You might have unhelpful thoughts about all kinds of things. Here are some examples:

**Yourself:**

- “I’m worthless”
- “I’m a failure”
- “I’m not good enough”

**Others:**

- “No one likes me”
- “Other people are better than me”

**The future:**

- “Things will never get better”
- “Everything’s pointless”

**The world:**

- “The world is against me”
- “The world is a bad place”

Do you ever think in any of the ways outlined above?

Try thinking about a time when you started to feel down. Consider what was running through your mind at that time – was it a negative thought?

## 9. Patterns of unhelpful thinking

Knowing the common patterns that unhelpful thoughts follow can help you to recognise and challenge them before they have a negative effect on the things you do.

Here are some common patterns of unhelpful thinking:

### Emotional reasoning

This means treating emotions as if they're facts.

For example:

- "I feel guilty – I must have done something wrong."
- "I feel alone, that means nobody cares about me."

### Must and should statements

People often live by fixed rules for themselves about what they "should" do and how they "should" feel, and judge themselves harshly if they don't meet them.

For example:

- "I should have found a better job by now."
- "I must vacuum the whole house every day."

When people think like this, they're being critical of themselves, which brings their mood down.

If you find yourself thinking this way, it can help a lot to accept that things and people aren't always perfect, and they don't have to be for you to be happy.

**Black and White Thinking:**

People often see things as black or white when they're feeling low – there's no 'in between'.

For example:

"I failed that maths exam – my life is a disaster and I'm stupid."
"My partner broke up with me – no one will ever love me again."

**Jumping to conclusions:**

People often assume they know what others are thinking, and the assumptions are usually negative.

For example:

A friend doesn't say hello when you see them across the street. You think they must hate you and never want to see you again. In fact, they just didn't see you.

Jumping to conclusions can also make you feel like you know the future, and that it will be bad.

For example:

"I lost my job – I'll never find another one."

**Over-generalising:**

Based on one isolated incident, people with this thinking pattern assume all other events will follow a similar pattern in the future. Basically, you find it hard to see a negative event as a one off.

For example:

After failing your driving test, you think you'll never be able to drive.

**Dismissing the positives:**

Often people can ignore the positive aspects of life or situations, and instead focus on the negative.

For example:

Your boss gives you a good review, but you're certain they're only saying positive things because they have to – that they don't really mean them.

**Labelling:**

People who are low often label themselves in negative ways.

For example:

"I'm ugly"
"I'm stupid"

**Personalisation:**

People who think this way believe that everything is to do with them, and it's usually negative – they place blame on themselves for no logical reason.

For example:

"My colleague is in a bad mood today – I must have done something to upset them." In reality, your colleague's bad day could have nothing to do with you.

Do any of your unhelpful thoughts follow these patterns? Make a list of the ones you have most often, and try to put them in one of the categories above.

It's important to remember that anyone can experience thoughts like this, and that patterns of unhelpful thinking can be managed so that they don't bother you as much, or at all.

## 10. How to challenge unhelpful thoughts

Once you have recognised an unhelpful thought the next stage is to challenge it. To do this, you can ask yourself a series of questions.

The example below outlines the cycle of negative thoughts and feelings. It shows how a situation, combined with negative feelings, can create a cycle with unhelpful thoughts. When you have an unhelpful thought, it makes you feel depressed and upset, which creates more negative feelings. It also works the other way around - negative feelings make it more likely you'll have unhelpful thoughts, which create more negative feelings.

In the next section, you can fill out an example of this cycle from your own life.

**Example:**

**Situation**

"My partner was supposed to phone me 20 minutes ago and they haven't phoned yet."

**My feelings**

Scared, alone, panicky.

**My unhelpful thought**

"My partner is going to dump me!"

## 11. Activity 3

Use the boxes below to write about a time when you had an unhelpful thought. This will help you to understand and remember how the cycle of negative thoughts and feelings works.

The next time you find yourself feeling low or experiencing an unhelpful thought, it will be easier to remind yourself of what is happening and challenge the negative thought.

**Situation**

**My feelings**

**My unhelpful thought**

## 12. Challenges to an unhelpful thought

Now you can challenge your unhelpful thoughts by asking these questions. Work through the questions below, using the examples to give you ideas.

Example:

“My partner was supposed to phone me 20 minutes ago and they haven’t phoned yet. I’m worried this means they want to break up.”

### 1. Is there any evidence against this thought?

- “We’ve talked about moving in together.”
- “We’re getting on really well just now.”

### 2. Is there any evidence for this thought (based in fact)?

- “They’re 20 minutes late phoning me.”
- “They’re usually on time.”

### 3. Can you identify any patterns of unhelpful thinking?

- “I’m mind reading thinking that they want to break up.”
- “I’m ignoring the positives – the fact that we’ve been getting on well.”

### 4. What would you say to a friend who had this thought in a similar situation?

- “I’d say they’re just busy, stop stressing – they’ll no doubt call soon.”

### 5. Is there another way of looking at this situation?

- “They’re probably just busy and will call soon.”

### 6. Is there a proactive solution to this unhelpful thought?

- “I could distract myself by doing something else, like watching TV or reading a book.”

Now complete the table below with your own answers to these questions.

**13. Activity 4**

Now complete the table below to challenge your own unhelpful thoughts.

| **What's the situation? For example, you could write who is there, what you're doing, and when and where it's taking place.** |
| --- |
| |
| **What are you feeling? For example, you could write how you feel and rate how strong your feelings are, from 0% to 100%.** |
| |
| **Unhelpful thought** |
| |
| **Evidence that supports the unhelpful thought** |
| |

| **Evidence against the unhelpful thought** |
| --- |
| |
| **Alternative/balanced thought - after you've written an alternative thought, rate how much you believe in the thought from 0% to 100%** |
| |
| **Rate how strong your feelings are now, from 0% to 100%** |
| |

Once you've asked yourself these questions, read over your answers to help you come up with a more balanced view of the situation.

For example:

"They're only 20 minutes late, which isn't very long. And I don't actually have any real evidence to support the thought and fear that they're going to break up with me."

Try to apply these questions to the unhelpful thoughts that you notice.

## 14. Problem solving

You might find it more difficult to cope if you have a lot of problems you can't seem to get on top of. This can make your mood worse and leave you feeling very depressed.

It's possible to end up worrying over problems without finding a way to resolve them. This can interfere with many parts of your life - even things like eating and sleeping.

It can help to develop a structured way of working through a problem. Beginning to overcome some of your problems might help you to feel better.

Click here to use our Problem solving guide

## 15. Self-esteem

Self-esteem relates to how we think and feel about ourselves, and how much value you think you have as a person.

People with low self-esteem often ignore their own achievements and positive things about themselves, and criticise themselves even when there's no reason to.

Low self-esteem isn't a medical condition or mental illness on its own, although you can experience low self-esteem as a result of mental health issues like depression.

Click here to use our Self-esteem guide

## 16. Next steps

Keep using the techniques you found helpful from this guide – they should continue to benefit you. If there are some things that you didn't find helpful to begin with, stick with them for a few weeks – CBT can take a little time to work.

### Further help

If you're feeling distressed, in a state of despair, suicidal or need emotional support you can phone Samaritans for free on 116 123.

If you feel you need more help with your mental health, try speaking to your GP, or search for mental health and wellbeing services in your area.

For information and advice when you're feeling down, you can phone Breathing Space on 0800 83 85 87.

The Breathing Space phoneline is available:

- 24 hours at weekends (6pm Friday to 6am Monday)
- 6pm to 2am on weekdays (Monday to Thursday).

If you found this guide helpful and would like to do more work like this, Living Life offers a range of structured psychological interventions and therapies to improve mental health and wellbeing. They're open Monday to Friday, from 1pm to 9pm, and you can phone them on 0800 328 9655.

### Learn more

To learn more about coping with depression and low mood, visit some other parts of NHS inform:

Read some more tips for coping with depression

Learn about exercise for depression

Read about seasonal affective disorder (SAD), often called "the winter blues"

Learn what to do if you are worried that someone else is depressed