

# COPING WITH DEPRESSION

## BOOKLET 3

### Negative Thoughts and how to Deal with Them

This booklet was produced by the Clinical Psychology Service of Northampton Healthcare Community [NHS] Trust. It forms part of a series of booklets that are designed to provide people with information that will reassure, advise and encourage them.

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**NEGATIVE THOUGHTS AND HOW TO**

## DEAL WITH THEM

### THOUGHTS CAN BE POWERFUL:

**The Psychoanalyst Alfred Adler wrote:**

“Meanings are not determined by situations, but we determine ourselves by the meanings we give to situations”

Many people become depressed because of an event/s and so one can say that there is a “realistic” basis for their depression.

Other depressed people feel despair and dismay when they look at the world around them and feel they want no part of it. Certainly, there is suffering and disaster, and there sometimes seems no justice in what occurs. Also, one cannot “treat” depression by ignoring the reality of what is wrong both inside and outside ourselves.

The depressed person’s situation is not perfect [nobody’s is !], but their thoughts usually go far beyond the facts, the reality of the situation. It is not just the event which disturbs them, but the VIEW which they take of the event.

### THE LINK BETWEEN THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS:

Does it really matter if you sometimes think in a distorted, negative way ? YES, it does matter because:

**HOW YOU THINK CAN  
AFFECT HOW YOU FEEL**

Depressed people’s thoughts trap them in a vicious cycle. The more depressed they become, the more negative thoughts they have, and the more they believe these thoughts, the more depressed they become and so on and on .....

Every event has the potential to affect the way we feel, BUT this does not usually happen automatically. Instead, there is a chain like this:

**EVENT→THOUGHTS→FEELINGS**

### ***Let’s Consider an Example:***

Imagine that you have sat a test at work and you learn that you have failed by a few marks. This means that your promotion chances will be blocked for a while.

When trying to explain to yourself **why** you have failed what do you say to yourself ?

*"Alright, I failed this time, but it was a very hard test, and I wasn't feeling very well".*

How would this affect your attitude to the future, to taking the test again ?  
Probably you will think:

*"Fine, it was tough, but maybe next time I'll feel better and perhaps the test will be a little easier".*

You feel fairly optimistic.

But suppose you had thought:

*"I never do well in tests because I'm stupid and I can't take the pressure".*

Then you would feel pessimistic about the future:

*"Oh no, I'm not putting myself through that again; there's no point ..... I'll never get promotion; I'll be doing this boring job till retirement".*

With the last reaction, you are blaming yourself one hundred percent, you are blaming something inside yourself like your stupidity or a character defect. Because these are internal qualities or character traits, you presume there is not much you can do about them. For example:

*"I'm anxious". "I've always been anxious". "I always will be anxious".*

With the first reaction, you look for explanations outside of yourself which don't necessarily have such bad implications for the future. Maybe you won't have a cold on the day you take the test. Maybe the test will be easier.

People who are depressed tend to blame themselves for failures and ignore their ability to change. These harsh, critical thoughts are not necessarily based on real facts and yet thinking them makes the person sad and hopeless and therefore less likely to do something about it in the future. Thus a vicious cycle starts to operate. People who are not depressed will tend to see whether there is anything about the situation which is relevant to the failure.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

<u>AUTOMATIC:</u>	They seem to happen without any effort on your part - they come "out of the blue"
<u>UNHELPFUL:</u>	They keep you depressed, make it difficult to change and stop you getting what you want out of life.

<b>PLAUSIBLE:</b>	You accept them as facts and it does not occur to you to question them
<b>INVOLUNTARY:</b>	You do not choose to have them and they can be very difficult to switch off
<b>DISTORTED:</b>	They do not fit all the facts

**YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF BY RECOGNISING YOUR NEGATIVE THOUGHTS AND UNDERSTANDING WHY THEY ARE PROBABLY INCORRECT AND ILLOGICAL. CHECK THE CHARACTERISTICS ABOVE AND SEE HOW WELL THEY FIT YOUR NEGATIVE THOUGHTS**

<b>TYPES OF THINKING ERROR IN DEPRESSION</b>	
<b>Thinking Error</b>	<b>Examples:</b>
Jumping to a conclusion without any real evidence	You ring a friend. They are abrupt. You assume they no longer like you. Could be they have a headache or are watching TV
Focusing on a detail taken out of context	Someone at work finds a minor mistake in your work. You think "I made a total mess of that"
Overgeneralising	A long relationship ends. You overgeneralise: "I'll never find anyone else".
Placing events in one of two "black or white" categories with nothing in between	People are either totally for me or totally against me
Imagining catastrophes	You look at some peeling wallpaper in your house. "The place is falling apart. I can't stay here".
Ignoring the good aspects of situations	Children complain that their mashed potato is lumpy. You think: "I can't even cook simple meals now", ignoring that they said everything else was fine.

**HOW MANY TYPES OF THINKING ERROR DO YOU RECOGNISE IN YOURSELF ?**

**A NEGATIVE THOUGHT HAS TWO MAIN EFFECTS:**

- 1. A SAD MOOD IMMEDIATELY** - it makes you feel worse

2. **LESS LIKELIHOOD OF TAKING POSITIVE ACTION IN THE FUTURE** - you will “give up” before you’ve tried anything to put the situation right

For these reasons it is **VERY IMPORTANT TO CHALLENGE NEGATIVE THOUGHTS AS THEY OCCUR**. It may take time to learn to do this, but **ONCE LEARNT IT CAN BECOME HABITUAL** - that is, a **NATURAL** part of the way you think. Why it takes time to learn more helpful ways to think is because negative ways to think are also habits. They seem like the natural way to think. Negative thoughts are not natural:

**YOU CAN CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK**

You are then able to prevent yourself from becoming so depressed in the future. When trying to “catch” thoughts, watch out for times when your mood goes down. This usually doesn’t just happen. There is usually a negative thought before you felt down.

**CHALLENGING NEGATIVE THOUGHTS**

The **FIRST STEP** in overcoming negative thinking **IS TO BECOME AWARE OF YOUR THOUGHTS, AND OF THEIR EFFECTS ON YOU**. How can you do this ?

A start is to keep a simple, written record. **A useful way to become aware of negative thoughts is to write them down** as soon as they occur. The following form may help:

First, write down the thought itself



Negative Thought
“I’m a failure”

Secondly, the situation that has resulted in this thought:



Negative Thought	Situation
“I’m a failure”	“I’m finding my Maths hard”

Last, but not least, the challenge ! \_\_\_\_\_



Negative Thought	Situation	Challenge
“I’m a failure”	“I’m finding my Maths hard”	“Maths is not one of my strong points. Even if I am experiencing difficulty it does not mean that “I am a

		failure". I haven't done any Maths since I was at school. Maybe I need more practice"
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Notice that in the "challenge" column we haven't put any bits of "positive thinking" like "It doesn't matter if I can't do my Maths". Instead when challenging the thought:

1. Accept the reality of the situation
2. Don't go beyond the situation, that is, stay with the facts of the situation e.g. "I am having difficulty with my Maths now. One factor could be that I am "rusty" and need practice. Also, I have been working for two hours. Maybe I should take a break. **NOT** "I've always found Maths hard in the past and therefore I always will. I might as well give up now, because no amount of effort will help".

It might be useful to rate the degree of belief in the original negative thought before we challenge it and then re-rate our degree of belief AFTER we have challenged it. Let's try and challenge another two negative thoughts:

Negative Thoughts	Initial Degree of Belief	Situation	Challenges	Degree of Belief Now
"There's nothing to get up for"	90%	9.00 am lying in bed	If I get up now, it will probably help me get a better night's sleep tonight. If I manage to get up I'll "reward" myself with an hour sitting down reading the paper.	50%
"I can't make it through the day"	70%	Don't want to get up	Other days have started just as badly as this one. I usually muddle through somehow	20%

Notice two things about this record:

1. It should be filled in at the time, when you have the negative thought. Sometimes the act of getting your [exaggerated] thoughts down on paper can be therapeutic, because you begin to realise that they are rather exaggerated - rather than just accepting them as the "natural way to think".
2. Challenging does not produce a miracle cure. Even after the challenges there is still some belief in the original negative thoughts. But there has

been a lessening from the near certainty of 90% belief in “There’s nothing to get up for” to an undecided 50%, and “I can’t make it through the day” is only 20% believed !

## **QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU CHALLENGE NEGATIVE THINKING**

### ***“No-one likes me any more”***

#### **1. WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE ?**

What evidence do I have to support this thought ?

Does what I think fit the facts ?

Am I jumping to conclusions ?

If you don’t have enough evidence to make a sound judgement, see if you can find out more of the facts before you make up your mind. Is there any evidence to contradict your belief ?

*[Joan seemed a bit off hand, but yesterday Sheila made a point of inviting me round for tea]*

#### **2. WHAT ALTERNATIVE VIEWS ARE THERE ?**

There is more than one way of seeing any situation

How would someone else view this situation ?

What advice would I give to a friend who was in my position ?

Would I be as negative if another person was in my situation ?

*[I’m not sure. I think most people would be a bit hurt - I’ve always been sensitive to signs of rejection]*

#### **3. WHAT IS THE EFFECT OF THINKING LIKE THIS ?**

Does it help me ? Does it make me feel better ?

*[Definitely not ! It makes me less likely to telephone Joan again which is a shame because she can be a very good friend]*

#### **4. AM I MAKING AN ERROR IN MY THINKING ?**

- Am I thinking in an extreme, “all or nothing” way ?

*[Yes. I’m thinking in terms of whether being liked by everyone or being liked by no-one]*

- Am I condemning myself as a person because of just one event ?

*[Not exactly. But I’m looking at myself as not at all likeable]*

- Am I concentrating on my weaknesses and forgetting my strengths?

- Am I blaming myself for something which is not my fault ?
- Am I taking something personally when it really has nothing particular to do with me ?

*[I may be doing this. The reason for Joan sounding offhand may be nothing to do with me. Maybe the children were being difficult; or maybe she had just had a row with her husband. There are many explanations which do not involve me at all. The fact that Joan was offhand with me is unlikely to be a personal reflection on me]*

- Am I expecting myself to be perfect ? Am I setting myself very high standards ? Is it reasonable for me to have the same expectations of myself when I am very depressed as when I am feeling fine ? Am I being realistic about what I want to achieve or setting myself an impossible task ?
- Am I using a double standard: How would I view someone else in my position ? Would I be as hard on someone else as I am on myself ?
- Am I only paying attention to the black side of things ?

*[Probably. I found it quite hard to realise that Sheila had been particularly nice - even though it was only yesterday]*

- Am I exaggerating the importance of one particular event ?

*[Definitely. It's stupid to think that just because Joan was a bit offhand, other people will turn against me. She's just one person]*

- Am I making assumptions about the future, instead of keeping an open mind out bit ?

*[Maybe. If I just assume that no-one likes me, then I won't find out whether this is true or false].*

### **SOME HINTS FOR GETTING STARTED**

**1. Use the negative thoughts record form included with this booklet:**

With the 5 columns:

- negative thought
- initial degree of belief
- situation involved
- challenges to the negative thought
- later degree of belief in original negative thought

2. ***Decide to use it for a short time to start with. Note down negative thoughts IMMEDIATELY AS THEY OCCUR.*** [Don't let a couple of hours go by. You may forget what the thoughts were !]

Sometimes people find it very difficult to write down any challenges at the time when the negative thoughts occur. If this happens to you, find another time; sit down with the form, look at the list of questions on pages 5 and 6 and then start to challenge the negative thoughts.

3. ***Gradually, as you become more used to challenging thoughts, you will find that you can write down challenging thoughts almost straight after having written the negative ones.***
4. ***The next stage on from this is to automatically challenge the negative thoughts, hearing yourself voicing the questions in your own mind.*** It may sound silly, but a good way to do this is to read aloud the challenging questions which appear on pages 5 and 6.

**AS THIS PROCESS OF CHALLENGING BECOMES A HABIT YOU WILL FIND THAT YOU ARE DEVELOPING MORE OF A TOLERANCE TO THE FREQUENT MINOR FRUSTRATIONS AND REBUFFS OF EVERYDAY LIFE.**

### **TESTING OUT SOME MORE NEGATIVE THOUGHTS “REALITY TESTING”**

Sometimes just sitting and trying to challenge negative thoughts does not work. Simply arguing against your negative thoughts is not as effective as actively testing out your rational thoughts. This can be very helpful in breaking old habits of thinking and building better ones.

#### ***The final step in overcoming depression is to TEST WHAT YOU THINK THROUGH ACTION:***

If you have reached the stage in recovery in which you are seeing friends, colleagues, neighbours, family and acquaintances you will receive a lot of feedback on how realistic your thinking is. That is you will be able to “reality test” negative thoughts in a whole range of situations.

The more contact you have with a range of people the easier it will be to explain their behaviour in terms of their personality, and the less likely you are to assume that it is stable features of your own personality which determine how everyone will react to you.

Let's “reality test” an example:

Suppose Jane has just split up with her boyfriend and this following her divorce. She believes she will never meet a suitable man again. She also

believes that she cannot adequately enjoy going out without a male companion.

**PREDICTION:**

“If I don’t have a boyfriend with me then I won’t enjoy going out socially”

**REVIEW OF EVIDENCE:**

“For as long as I can remember there’s been a man around - and sometimes one or two queuing up as well ! There have been a few occasions when I’ve just gone out with a female friend and it’s been alright”

**Experiment 1:** Go to an event at which there will probably be other single people

**Result:** Went to a concert. I wasn’t really that conscious of being on my own and I quite enjoyed the music.

**Experiment 2:** Go to an event of a more obviously “social” nature

**Result:** Went to a Folk Music Night at the Club. Actually met some interesting people, so I wasn’t alone

**CONCLUSION:**

Prediction proved to be largely incorrect. I found that it was possible to have a pleasant time even without a boyfriend.

**CHALLENGING SOME UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS**

You may still be wondering why some people suffer from these negative thoughts ? It is partly habit, but some of these thoughts can be clearly connected to “underlying assumptions” about the world.

Many depressed people are prisoners of the words “should”, “ought” and “must”. Underlying much of depressive thinking there is often a perfectionist striving:

“People will like, respect, admire the “good me”, but they will dislike, condemn and ignore the “bad me”. Here are some unhelpful assumptions:

***How many of these can you recognise in your own thinking ?***

- If I cannot do something well, there’s no point in doing it at all
- It is awful for someone to show any signs of weakness
- If someone is better than me at something, that means they are a better person than I am.
- Unless I set myself standards, I am likely to be hopeless

- My worth as a person depends on what others think of me. If someone dislikes me, that means I am not likeable
- I must cope with all life's problems
- Life ought to be hard work most of the time
- I should not let myself go and enjoy things
- I must always be a "good" son/daughter/parent/spouse
- I must always be nice to other people
- I should be rewarded for being good
- If I don't succeed today, then all my previous successes count for nothing

Perhaps, as a young child, conforming to strict standards really did ensure approval, but adult life is a lot more complex. The standards of perfection listed above guarantee failure and the self-reproach which that brings. Do you think that's a price worth paying for the few moments of security you get for having briefly achieved your standards ?

### **SUMMARY:**

We have suggested that thinking in certain ways can lead to becoming despondent and can hinder your recovery from depression. A tendency to think in these ways may also make you vulnerable to developing depression in the future.

The characteristics and types of negative thinking were discussed. Negative, depressive thinking seems often to be related to:

- Setting excessively high standards for yourself
- Thinking in "black or white" terms
- Being rooted in ideas and roles which are not adaptive to your present position

We have looked at ways to challenge negative thoughts:

### ***Using a form to record and write down the negative thought:***

1. Recording the negative thought
2. Rating your initial degree of belief in that thought
3. Recording and looking at the situation
4. Challenging the negative thought
5. Rating our degree of belief in the negative thought once we have challenged it

### ***Asking specific questions which will help challenge the reality of your thinking***

***Reality testing: You need to test the reality of your negative thoughts through action***

NEGATIVE THOUGHTS	INITIAL DEGREE OF BELIEF	SITUATION	CHALLENGES	DEGREE OF BELIEF NOW

**YOU CAN CHALLENGE DEPRESSING THOUGHTS AND REPLACE THEM WITH ONES WHICH ARE MORE REALISTIC**

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