

Take Action Workbook

Module 5

Understand *your* depression

Not understanding why you are depressed can lead to unhelpful, depression-reinforcing assumptions and self-bullying attempts to 'snap out of it'. Learning more about how depression works in a self-reinforcing spiral and what kinds of factors can make you vulnerable can help you take a more self-compassionate attitude towards your depression.

This module helps you understand your own depression better as a foundation for taking a more self-caring approach, which is vital as the foundation for all other strategies for overcoming depression.

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How depression is affecting me

An important rule of thumb in any campaign is to 'know your enemy'. Read the What is depression? and How depression works sections to learn more about depression and how it may be affecting you. If you haven't already done the 'Am I depressed?' worksheet in Module 2, then it is repeated here as 'How depression is affecting me' for you to use to survey the specific impact your mood is having on your daily life currently. This is an important first step in understanding your own depression. It also gives a good baseline for targeting the most relevant strategies for you.

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How depression is affecting me

Use this worksheet to check whether and how depression may be affecting you.

1. Screening questions

During the last month, have you often been bothered by feeling down, depressed or hopeless?	YES/NO
During the last month, have you often been bothered by having little interest or pleasure in doing things?	YES/NO



“The main problem I faced was failing to realise that I was suffering with depression, and consequently doing nothing to combat it.” – Rees

If you answer YES to both questions then fill in the warning signs checklist.

2. Check the warning signs

Warning signs	Yes/No?	If yes, how many days in last two weeks? Which ones?
Persistently sad, anxious, empty or generally low mood		
Loss of interest/pleasure in doing things		
Lethargy/decreased energy		
Problems with sleep (including too much)		
Appetite/weight changes		
Increased tearfulness		
Poor concentration/difficulty with decisions		
Hopelessness/pessimism		
Feeling bad about yourself, guilty, or helpless		
Restlessness or being fidgety, or else markedly slowed down		
Thoughts of death or suicide		

Remember that many of these signs are an occasional part of normal life.

But depression may be a factor if you have been

- persistently sad, anxious, empty or low AND
- you have experienced at least 3 or more of the above signs on more than half the days in the last two weeks

Take it seriously and take action – preferably get professional help.

Turn overleaf for a more detailed personal survey to help you assess the specific ways in which depression is affecting you personally.

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3. My daily life and functioning assessment

This detailed personal survey provides a useful inventory of the ways in which depression is affecting your daily functioning.

This is a useful record to show a doctor or other professional. It will also help you choose the most effective strategies for tackling your depression and moving forward.

Life area	Section A: Say if present and give details
Feeling low	
Self-hurting	
Suicidal thoughts	
Feeling bad about yourself	
Feeling hopeless	
Worries about illness	
Feeling unattractive	
Other worries	
Feeling angry	
	Section B: Describe changes
Eating	
Sleeping	
Getting out of the house/your room	
Exercise	
Drinking	
Smoking	
Other substance use	
Ability to study	
Concentration on course	
Concentration on other things	
Getting work done on time	
Being busy in general	
Time with friends	
Going out	
Sexual activity	
Hobbies/societies/other interests	
Ability to do paid work (if relevant)	
Finances	
Any other relevant area	



How my depression spiral works

The How Depression Works section explains how depression can develop and become entrenched in a complex self-reinforcing downward spiral of interacting factors.

This worksheet helps you identify the different elements contributing to and maintaining your depression. Understanding this better will help you identify the best strategies for tackling your depression.

Context

What circumstances in my life may contribute to me feeling low?

List things causing you stress currently as well as any possible events/experiences in your life which you think may contribute to your current mood.

Mood / Feelings

What is my dominant mood and what are the main feelings that I am experiencing?

List your mood and feelings with the most prominent first (eg. sad/tearful, empty/numb, hopeless, uninterested, low, guilty, worthless, helpless, anxious, angry)

Thinking / Attitude

Can I identify any examples of unhelpful 'depressed thinking' habits?

For example: negative tunnel vision, all-or-nothing thinking, emotional reasoning, perfectionism, self-bullying, jumping to conclusions etc.

Body / Physiology

What ways does my body respond to these circumstances, thoughts & feelings?

List things like fatigue or lethargy; chronic illness; or any indications of stress/'fight or flight' in your body – frequent anxiety signals like racing heart, restlessness, shallow breathing or else irritability and hyper-aggression

Behaviour / Actions

How does the depression show in how I behave and what I do?

List examples of avoidance (like procrastination, skipping lectures or other commitments, social withdrawal), as well as changes in sleep habits, eating, hygiene etc.

There isn't usually one simple straightforward cause for depression. Quite often it feels as if there is no good reason for it – but this does not mean that it has struck randomly.

This worksheet will help you consider some of the complex, interacting factors, unique to you, which may have played a role in making you vulnerable to depression. You will also be able to consider any relevant triggers for a specific episode of depression.

Considering and understanding these factors in greater depth may be easier with the help of a trained professional, such as a counsellor (See also 'Counsellors & doctors')

1. Depression vulnerability

1. My depression biology

Brain chemicals called neurotransmitters are responsible for regulating our moods. Which (if any) of the following factors affecting neurotransmitters might be relevant in my life?

Genetics

Am I aware of any depression or other mental health problems in my immediate or wider blood relatives? (Note that this is only a rough indicator – there is no way currently to test for a genetic vulnerability to depression.)

Early experiences

Did I experience significant trauma, neglect, abandonment, abuse as a baby or very young child? (Note that early experiences also have psychological effects – see next section.)

Hormones

Am I aware of any hormonal issues or conditions that may contribute to mood problems? (eg. pregnancy, breastfeeding, polycystic ovary syndrome, chronic fatigue syndrome, glandular fever, diabetes, thyroid problems)

Blood sugar

Do I eat a balanced diet, with regular meals and snacks? Am I aware of any connection between what I eat and my mood?

Stress

What stress factors are there in my life? Are my current coping strategies helping me to manage the stress in my life or not? Do I have any symptoms of 'chronic stress'?

Write down specific examples of the above factors here:



"I think depression is biological because it runs in my family, but I don't think you can underestimate how certain events can affect you. I just dismissed things like bullying as a cause, but actually they can shape your world." – Megan



2. My depression psychology

Do I feel 'not good enough' in some way? Do I know what may have led to me feeling this way about myself? Which, if any, of the following types of experience are relevant to my experience?

Bad treatment by carers

Have I been badly treated in childhood by parents or carers – have I experienced abuse, neglect, chronic lack of affection and/or criticism?

Insufficient care

Has there been a failure in provision of the basic attention, security and care I needed to receive as a child eg. as a result of parental illness or other incapacity, parents' own emotional problems, parental divorce or relationship difficulty?

Conditional love or approval/acceptance

Have I experienced disapproval or rejection? Does it feel as if my self-worth is dependent on my 'performance', in some way?
Does it feel as if 'failure' would be catastrophic to me?

Bullying

Have I experienced bullying or bad treatment at any stage by others besides parents/carers? Did I receive adequate support or help to address or stop it?

'Difference' or lack of acceptance

Have I felt, or been made to feel, painfully 'different' from others?
Have I experienced negative effects for this difference? (see also Depression sociology)

Other

Are there other experiences which have contributed to low self-worth or feeling 'not good enough'?



***"I just felt like I was a horrible person if my dad could be that way with me – call me stupid and things like that and laugh at me. I felt really unlovable."** – Sarah*



Framework for understanding my depression

Understanding how and why depression is affecting you is the best way to plan the most effective strategies for tackling it.

Use this worksheet to summarise what you know about your own depression so that you can:

- evaluate the relevance of the strategies you may already have tried
- plan further targeted strategies

1. Daily functioning

How is depression affecting *you*? Can you identify the most significant moods, thought patterns, daily habits and impacts on your functioning and general relationships and interactions with others?

Summarise your learning from the 'Am I depressed?' and the 'How my depression works' sections:

2. Triggers

What triggers have you been able to identify which may have set off a downward spiral in your life?

(eg. a traumatic event or loss, such as a bereavement or relationship break up; major change in circumstances; experiences of failure or fear of failure; illness or other period of inactivity)

Remember that because depression works in a self-reinforcing downward spiral even quite small triggers may be relevant

Summarise what you have learnt about your triggers from the Why me, why now? section:



3. Vulnerability factors

What are the possible biological, psychological and social factors which may have made you personally vulnerable to depression?

Summarise what you have learnt about your vulnerability factors from the Why me, why now? section.

You may also find the Different Perspectives section helpful if you feel that a sense of meaningless or lack of clarity about your values is relevant to your depression

4. Useful immediate strategies

What strategies have you already tried and how helpful have they been? What other strategies might help you take immediate steps to tackle your depression?

Use the Self-help first steps and then the Healthier daily routines sections to identify the most immediately effective strategies for turning the depression spiral around, and choose which are most relevant in addressing the way in which depression is affecting you:

The Tackle Depression section lists strategies in order of immediacy. If you are moderately or severely affected by your depression, or if you are having any suicidal thoughts, then your most immediate strategy should be to use the Get Support section to identify appropriate sources of help



5. Longer-term strategies

What longer-term strategies have you tried in the past and how helpful have they been? What other longer-term strategies do you think you might consider?

Use the Changing attitudes and Living well sections to identify strategies and skills for longer-term protection against depression and how to live a happier life. Choose which strategies are most relevant in addressing the triggers and vulnerabilities you have identified as pertinent to your depression:

Longer-term strategies such as identifying and challenging depressed thinking habits, learning self compassion, and healing the effect of difficult life experiences are easier to do with the help of a trained professional like a counsellor. Taking antidepressant medication under a doctor's care is another longer-term strategy which can address biological vulnerability and raise mood sufficiently to address other longer-term challenges

Evaluate:

Of the strategies identified in the last two sections of this worksheet, which would be the most effective thing for me to do next?

Commit:

In order to make a start with this next strategy, my first step is: _____

I will do this on: (date) _____

Next steps

Use this framework to review your list of depression-beating strategies using the 'Finding what works for you' section.

Goal to work towards

When you have successfully tackled your depression using some of these strategies then you may be able to use this framework to write down your own story. See the Take Action section for how to share your story on Students Against Depression.org and help others.

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