



Moving forward from interpersonal trauma

## Week 7: Understanding Depression and ways of Coping with Depression

Low mood, which is called depression when it becomes severe or lasts a long time, is a common difficulty for survivors of abuse.

### Signs of depression

- Low or sad mood
- Tearfulness
- Lethargy
- Trouble with sleeping (particularly waking early)
- Feeling tired
- Thinking in a 'pessimistic way' (always thinking the worst will happen)
- Difficulty thinking straight
- Changes in appetite (either losing appetite or eating more than usual)
- Lack of interest in things around you
- Not taking or getting pleasure from things you would usually enjoy
- Lack of 'get up and go'

Depression can vary from the mild 'blues' to severe clinical depression. At the milder end of the spectrum you might feel fed up, tearful and lacking energy for periods of time. In a more severe form you might find it hard to do even routine everyday tasks, have lots of thoughts of suicide and it can, at times require stays in hospital for treatment. It can also be anything in between.

## Why does surviving abuse increase your risk of depression?

There are many ways in which abuse can increase your risk of depression. Some of these reasons include

- You didn't get a chance to learn to value yourself, not to see yourself as worthy of care or attention, because someone has treated you badly. When you feel bad about yourself you always don't look after yourself well enough. You might believe you are not worthy of care, forgetting about your own needs and only looking after other people. In addition, you might work too hard, not take care of your diet etc.
- You might constantly criticise yourself, having an 'inner voice' or unhelpful self-talk that tells you that you are 'not good enough', 'not successful enough', 'not attractive enough', 'not a good person'. That unhelpful self-talk often sounds like the things we were told while the abuse was happening. The abuser may have repeatedly told you bad things about yourself, not because it is true but because people who think badly about themselves are easier to control. However, this 'programming' is very hard to get rid of once the abuse is over. Therefore, the verbal abuse we endured keeps going on in our own thoughts. Trying to break this pattern is hard but worth it.
- We learn through abuse to believe other people are potentially dangerous, hurtful and unpredictable. This makes supportive relationships that can protect people from depression, more difficult in the long term.
  - A good example of this is when you are walking down the street and see a friend on the other side and you wave. She doesn't wave back. If you are lucky enough to feel positive about people and yourself you will probably think 'She didn't see me, or she must have a lot on her mind-I must give her a phone'. But if you experience depression you have more chance of saying 'She didn't want to speak to me I must have done something wrong' (*self-blame and poor self-esteem*) or 'She's ignoring me, Well I'll never speak to her again' (*people are hurtful and you've got to protect yourself*). Both of these will make you feel low (and the second might make you feel really angry as well).

- You learn through abuse to believe the world is always unpredictable and frightening, making you more prone to thinking pessimistically and fearing the worst might happen again. Thinking like this makes you more prone to depression. A good example of this is when something (quite) small goes wrong, such as your car won't start in the morning or you miss the bus. Someone who had an optimistic outlook might be annoyed and think 'what a pain' (or words like that!) but someone thinking pessimistically might think 'this always happens to me and keeps happening to me, what have I done to deserve all this bad luck'. The first will make you fed up until you get the car fixed while the second will make you feel low for a longer time. In this way, life's smaller hurdles (and you have already survived some of the really big ones) can trip you up.
- The experience of abuse often leaves us asking ourselves 'why me'? We often answer this by thinking that we must have done something wrong to 'deserve' the abuse. Although this is common to all forms of abuse, abuse in childhood has a particularly bad effect on self-blame. Children cannot possibly understand that what has happened is not their fault (although it is hard enough to work this out at any time) and often come to the conclusion that they must have been 'bad' to 'deserve' abuse. After all everything adults do must be 'right'. That's what children are always told. This feeling of 'badness' can take some time, patience and hard work to overcome. It's most important to remember that no matter when you were abused and by who (even several people) you did nothing to deserve the abuse.
- Shame is an emotion experienced by some survivors. This is a powerful emotion, linked to both anxiety and depression, where we feel we are not good enough, that we are inadequate and unworthy. It is particularly associated with critical, abusive or neglectful experiences in childhood.<sup>1</sup>
- In the same way as we looked at how our brains could be 'wired' for anxiety, it is believed that they also can be 'wired' for warmth and kindness, if we were lucky enough to experience repeated warm and kind interactions in our lives. If we don't have this system set up in our brain it can be hard to feel calm, safe, connected and content. We may need to practice being kind to ourselves (and others) to improve our ability to feel

---

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert, P (2010) *Compassion Focussed therapy* Routledge, London and New York

content and not feel ashamed. This has been called developing self-compassion. We will look at this in more detail next week.

## Coping with Depression

Tackling depression is not easy. You cannot just ‘pull yourself together’. Many survivors will need support or even specialist help to make a recovery. However, this session hopes to give you some ideas of how to take the first steps. Remember these only need to be small steps, taken patiently in your own time.

### Medication

If you are not taking any medicine to treat your depression and think it might be useful or think what you are taking is not as good as it could be

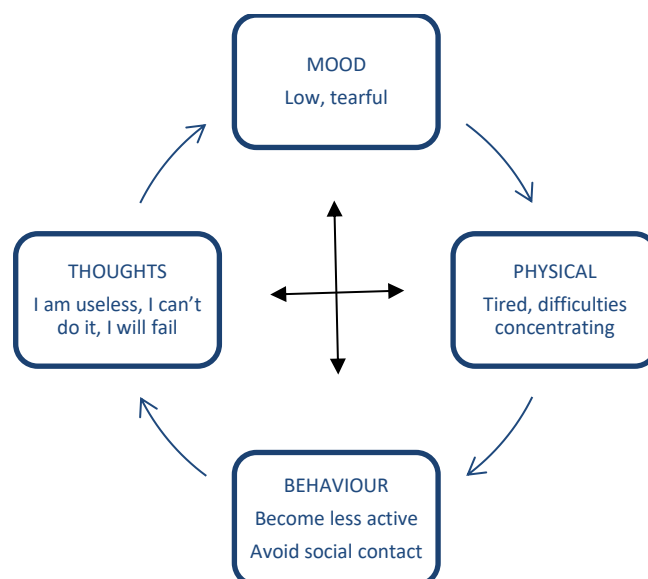
- Discuss this as soon as possible with your GP
- Discuss this as soon as possible with your psychiatrist/ CPN if you have one

However, there are lots of other things you can do to improve your feelings of depression.

### Increasing Activity Levels

Depression works in a vicious cycle. We feel sad, lethargic and self-critical. This leads to you feeling slowed down and tired. Your ability to complete activities goes down and you feel like a failure for not managing. This makes you more self-critical and low. This leads to lower activity levels and so it goes on.

#### *Vicious Cycle of Depression*



Increasing your activity levels can be a good way of breaking this spiral. This is because:

- Activity makes you feel less tired
- Doing more distracts you
- Achieving more boosts your confidence
- Being more active helps you think more clearly
- Doing more brings you in contact with other people

### *How to increase your activity levels*

As usual, remember the golden rules of the 3 P's; preparation, practice and patience. Set yourself some small tasks for the day such as having a walk to the shops or making a phone call. Often evening when you are feeling a little better, is a good time to plan the next day's tasks and write them down. In the morning (when you often feel slightly worse) use this written plan to remind you. Keep a diary.

Remember, if your feelings of depression are very bad or you have been feeling them for a long time, this will feel really difficult. At the beginning you might not enjoy doing the tasks, but if you keep going it will get easier. That is, you might have to 'fake it until you make it'. People often delay increasing their activity levels until they 'feel better', in reality it is important to get moving around and then you will start to notice improvements.

Another important thing to remember when planning your tasks is that you should do an equal balance of tasks that make you feel like you are achieving something and tasks that are pleasant. Remember the goal of being compassionate or kind to yourself. Mark your diary with a note as to whether your tasks are 'achievements' or 'pleasures'. There are some ideas on the next page.

<u>Achievements</u> (things you are glad you have done once they are done)	<u>Pleasures</u> (things that make you feel good)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phone someone you need to phone (i.e. the bank)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phone someone you want to phone (i.e. a supportive friend)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write a letter that you have been putting off</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do something from the safe coping list</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sort out your clothes. Those you don't want, take to a charity shop</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buy yourself something new (within your budget!)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walk to the shops rather than driving or taking a taxi/bus/car</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Go for a nice walk on a sunny day</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speak to your boss about something that has been niggling you</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a laugh with your colleague</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Go to the library and choose a book</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read a book/magazine</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decorate that room that has been bugging you, or rearrange the furniture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have something that you enjoy to eat or drink (in moderation).</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do a cross word</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask for a cuddle</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Go swimming</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Go to into the steam room</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clean the bathroom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a bath</li> </ul>

## Overcoming Depression: Using your Support Network

Having some relationships with others can be very important in recovery from depression. This might include professional supporters.

If you do not have a list of at least one or two supportive friends or helpers, it is important that you take steps to build a network of people you can turn to. Some things to think about include:

- Are you feeling too self-critical, thinking 'no-one cares about me' or 'I don't want to be a burden' when actually there might be people who would be happy to be supportive as you go through a bad patch? Who

would you be happy to help if you could? Perhaps they would be happy too.

- Did an abuser isolate you or turn you against family and friends, meaning there are less people you feel you can turn to now? Do you need to contact some old friends and get in touch again? Imagine if an old friend contacted you. How pleased would you be? Other people may be really pleased to hear from you to. Remember to choose safely.
- Have you withdrawn from people, due to your lack of trust (understandable though this may be) or your lack of energy and low mood? Gradually increasing your activity levels may put you in touch with more people. Remember small steps and to stay safe (look at the 'warning signs' list if you are not too sure about whether a relationship is good or not).
  - Plan a phone call a month to someone you have lost contact with and would like to get back in touch with. You will have made 12 calls in a year and perhaps some of them will work out well.
  - Write an email/birthday card/Christmas or other festival card with a note and your phone number in .
- Can you begin planning to join some local social activities? Even if you can't face going in, start to do some research about what is available. Then when a good day comes you will be ready
  - Voluntary groups are always looking for helpers
  - An exercise class (check the library, community centre or sports/leisure centre)
  - A local support group
  - An evening class (could be online?)

If you feel (as many will) that this is too hard, then try asking any professional helpers for advice on what is running locally.

## Overcoming Depression: Managing your Thinking

After abuse and trauma, our brains are wired on 'red alert' looking for things to go wrong, for people to let us down and for the worst to happen. As well as making us fearful and anxious (as we saw before), this understandably also makes us feel low and depressed.

We tend to think

- Things will always go wrong
- That there is very little we can do to change things and that we feel out of control.
- Everyone will let you down eventually

Evidence shows that those who feel less depressed tend to have a different pattern of thinking about things. They tend to think

- Sometimes, things might go wrong, but not necessarily
- If I do this or that I will be able to have some control over what happens.
- Some people will sometimes let you down, but not necessarily

An example of this might be a friend saying they would phone on Wednesday night and them not phoning till Friday morning, when they explain they had to work an extra couple of shifts. Would you have spent Thursday thinking....

‘See, you can’t trust anyone’

‘What have I done, they don’t like me anymore’

or

‘That’s unusual, I’ll leave it a couple of days and then phone and check they are alright’

When you are aware of the thoughts that are upsetting you, try these questions to help you make sure you are thinking clearly about the situation

- What would I think about this if I wasn’t feeling depressed?
- What would someone else think about this? (for example, a friend who you admire for the way they look at life)
- What would I think about this, if I had not had the experiences I have had?
- Do I have the evidence to ‘prove’ the thought I am having is true?

Remember, thoughts are just thoughts or ideas. They are not facts that you have to act on. You can change the way you think if another way of thinking is going to make you happier or healthier.

- Remember you are not to blame for the abuse that happened to you. **The abuse was the abusers decision.** You did not do anything to justify the abuse. No one deserves to be abused and that includes you. Can you



imagine saying to someone else who survived abuse 'I think you deserved it'. Don't be harder on yourself than you would be to others.

- **Be aware of the 'inner critical thoughts'** that were mentioned earlier. Do you have a stream of thoughts that seem to automatically run through your head?
  - I'm not good enough
  - I'm not attractive enough
  - I'm stupid and I'll fail if I try to do this (whatever that is.. change a light bulb, take on new work, talk to the bank manager/kids teacher..)
  - I'm a bad person (otherwise this wouldn't have happened)
- **Imagine these 'inner critical thoughts' could be wrong.** Thoughts are NOT facts. Learn not just to accept this view of yourself (which probably came from your abuser). Try to come up with new views of yourself. This can be hard, be patient with yourself.
  - I'm not perfect but I'm as good as anyone else.
  - I'm not a super-model (there are only 7 of those in the universe anyway) but I like my.....smile, hair, nose, friendliness or sense of humour. Try and write a list of your qualities. Think of how the people who care for you would view you.
  - I'm not stupid and if I don't try I'll never know if I can do it. Even if I can't .. change a light bulb, do my son's maths homework, master the instructions use my new mobile phone...it doesn't mean I'm stupid, just not superwoman/man.
  - I'm not a bad person. Abuse doesn't happen to bad people, it happens to anyone. Nothing I did made the abuse happen.
- **Try to see yourself as others (non-abusive friends, partners) see you now.** Do they think you are attractive? Do your friends see you as kind, warm, funny?
- **Learn to be compassionate:** Create a compassionate image in your mind of yourself. When you wake in the morning, spend a few minutes getting into a compassionate frame of mind. Try to be warm and non-judgemental about yourself when you notice you are being critical in your self-talk. This may be very difficult to begin with but remember the 3 p's. We will talk more about compassion next week.

- **Write ‘helpful’ messages to replace that critical voice** and stick them in places in your house, your car, your bag, and your pockets, put them as messages that pop up on your mobile or computer.
- **Make sure you read your helpful messages every day.**
- **Keep a diary of what you achieve.** Remember that the important word in ‘small steps’ is steps.

Overcoming depression can take a while and you may need more support and advice than can be covered here. However, if you make some of these changes you will be on the right road!

**Try the exercise in the key points handout and keep 3Ps and small steps in mind.**

**Remember...**

**I  
am  
incredible**