Appendix 2
Self-help for depression

Depression is an extremely common problem and it is estimated that one in ten adults will experience depression at some point during their life. It is a complex problem which has many differing symptoms, which can include: a sense of loss of pleasure and interest in life and activities, feelings of worthlessness, guilt, inferiority, inadequacy, helplessness and weakness, together with an overwhelming sense of sadness, despair, loss of hope and self-hatred. Depression can also cause impaired concentration and memory, indecisiveness and intense self-criticism. Suicidal ideation of varying intensities is extremely common in depressed individuals. Also, there are a number of physical symptoms associated with depression which can include fatigue, lethargy, sleep disruption, restlessness and agitation, headache, muscular pain, back pain, weight loss or gain or appetite changes and loss of sexual desire.

Fortunately, there are a number of things you can do which can help you to feel better. The problem, however, is often motivation and feeling that any attempts to help yourself will be hopeless. That is part of how depression works – it leaves people feeling hopeless and drains any motivation from them. The difficulty is that feeling like things are hopeless and feeling tired and lacking in motivation to do anything put people who are depressed on a downward spiral that leads them to feel worse.

When people are depressed, they begin to do less because they don’t feel up to doing their usual things. The problem is that this tends to make the problem worse, as, eventually, people who are depressed do less and less and then feel bad about themselves because of the reduction in their activity levels. Doing less also means that people who are depressed do not have enough positive and enjoyable activities in their life to help generate or sustain good feelings.

Although you might feel tired, hopeless and lacking in motivation, it is essential to your recovery that you take active steps to help yourself recover from your depression. There is considerable research which shows that people who have depression who put time and energy into activities which will help them recover have a substantially higher rate of recovery, will get better quicker and are less likely to relapse than those who hope and wait for their depression to change by chance. Similarly, research has demonstrated that people in therapy
who consistently complete any between-session ‘homework’ also have better outcomes to their therapy.

All of the things listed here are known to help improve mood and feelings of well-being. These recommendations work best when you consistently put them into practice over a period of time – none of them will work like a ‘magic cure’ and change everything immediately but, when used regularly and in combination, they can help you to feel better. Be patient when using them as the effect of using them gradually builds up and increases over time.

It is important that you are realistic with yourself – everyone’s mood fluctuates to some extent, so, even when you put these things into practice, you will still have bad days. That doesn’t mean that things aren’t working; it just means that, today, they might not be so effective. Persist with them and, over time, they may help you to feel much better.

Also, remember, you will get things wrong, forget to do things and make a mess of things from time to time – this is normal, and part of being a person. We all mess up, get things wrong and forget things from time to time. Don’t give yourself a hard time for making mistakes.

It can be hard to find time to do things to make yourself feel better. Most people lead very busy lives and have a lot of demands on their time. The purpose of these recommendations is to help you feel better about yourself – if you feel better about yourself you may well find that other things in your life improve. It is important to prioritise you and to really commit to feeling better. Making big changes in how you feel will require time and effort on your part – it is recommended that you put in at least 20 minutes per day into activities that will contribute to your recovery.

If you have a lot of housework or studying to do, it is very easy to see the whole lot and become disheartened and feel overwhelmed by it all, and then lose any motivation to do anything about it. Breaking things down into small chunks can help with this. For instance, spending 15 minutes on something you are finding hard to face (such as the housework or studying, or even taking some exercise) starts making a difference – it might not be much at first, but doing something is better than doing nothing. Following the guidance outlined here will help you with your therapy and to feel better much more quickly.

**Physical exercise**

There is some evidence to suggest that exercising three times per week has a mild antidepressant effect and can improve mood and general feelings of well-being. It is best to choose a type of exercise you enjoy (walking, swimming, exercise classes or weight training) and to stick to it.

Feeling in the mood to exercise is difficult for many people who feel depressed, but it is worth pushing yourself. You can start with a 10-minute walk and build up gradually if you feel very low in energy. If you build up your exercise levels to 45 minutes of exercise three times per week, you will find over a number of weeks that your energy levels increase and you feel better generally.
Diet

Some people find that their mood is improved by paying attention to their diet. Some nutritionists recommend the following advice, which you might find helpful:

- Increase your levels of omega-3 fats, either by eating oily fish regularly or by taking a supplement.
- Ensure you are getting enough vitamins and minerals – eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables and perhaps take a supplement.
- Eat two sources of protein each day to help your body build serotonin and other brain chemicals which affect your mood.
- Cut down on sugar and refined products (for example, switch to wholemeal rather than white bread).

These recommendations are all quite straightforward and in line with government healthy-eating guidelines. It can be hard to feel motivated to eat properly if you feel down, but it is important that you give yourself the best chance you can to help yourself feel better. Feeling healthier will help you to feel better about yourself.

Managing difficult thoughts and feelings

Trying to avoid or suppress certain thoughts or feelings is not very effective as a strategy. In order to feel better, we might need to examine and change how we think and feel about things. Bad feelings are inevitable – everybody feels upset or anxious or angry sometimes; it’s just a natural part of life. It’s just how we are made, and is part of being human. While we can’t avoid feeling upset from time to time, we can learn skills to help us manage our difficult or painful feelings and to carry on with our lives even when we do feel upset.

It can help to remember that feelings are just feelings – even though they might feel terrible, they will pass, no matter how bad they feel. It is important to remember that, while we can’t always control how we feel, we do have choices about how we act on our feelings and on what we do about our feelings.

It is unrealistic to think that you have to feel good all the time and to think that you can only do important things when you feel good. Feeling bad does not necessarily stop anyone from doing anything – you can still get on with your life even though you feel upset.

If you struggle with particular emotions, speak to your therapist about them and get some help in finding ways of managing them.

Self-care and self-nurturing

When people feel down, they often neglect themselves. It is important to take good care of yourself, and to do activities which you enjoy or that leave you feeling good. Sometimes, we can adjust how we approach some of the things we do every day to help how we feel. For example, we can turn some of our daily...
activities into opportunities to nurture or care for ourselves, such as deciding ‘I am doing this to relax’ when reading the newspaper or by making an effort over our appearance, even when we don’t really feel like it. Things like this don’t need to take up much time or effort or even cost anything but can help us to feel better.

Social contact

There is some evidence to suggest that regular social contact can improve mood and feelings of well-being. It can be hard to maintain social contact with people when you feel down, but it is important that you maintain regular contact with people. Humans are social creatures and interactions with other people give us ‘emotional vitamins’ which help us to be more emotionally healthy. Of course, some relationships are damaging or leave us feeling bad about ourselves – in such cases it can be best to reduce or even stop contact with someone who leaves us feeling bad.

In general, it is recommended that you have some sort of social contact at least once a week. It is worth speaking to your therapist about how you can improve your relationships and how you communicate with people to enable you to give and get the most out of your relationships and to make them more satisfying for you and others.

Improving your sleep and your body clock

Getting a good night’s sleep is very important when you feel down. Unfortunately, many people who are depressed find that their sleeping patterns become very disrupted and they find it hard to get to sleep and to stay asleep long enough. These recommendations can help with getting back into a good sleep pattern and in improving the quality of sleep that you have. You will need to persist with these recommendations though, because they can take a few weeks before they start to take full effect. This is because changing your body clock is best done gradually, and over a number of weeks. Getting into a good routine is important in improving your sleeping patterns.

• Go to bed at the same time every day.
• Get up from bed at the same time every day.
• Get some exercise every day – even as little as 10 minutes can help. Some people find going outdoors and getting some fresh air and light is helpful. Avoid exercising late in the evening as this can keep you awake.
• Keep the temperature in your bedroom a little cooler than the rest of the house – if you are too hot this can interfere with your sleep.
• Try to shut out as much noise as possible and also keep your bedroom quiet when trying to sleep.
• Keep your bedroom dark to help your sleep. Light interferes with the release of sleep hormones, so you might want to get some heavier curtains or blinds or use an eye mask.
• Use your bed only for sleep and sex – don’t watch television in bed.
• Avoid anything too stimulating before bed, such as playing computer games or watching anything exciting on TV or reading anything exciting or engaging.
• Avoid anything with caffeine in it during the evening. This includes tea, coffee, cola drinks and chocolate.
• Avoid using alcohol to help you sleep – alcohol reduces the quality of your sleep.
• If you are too hungry or too full this can disrupt your sleep. If you are hungry before bed, a small, light snack may help but avoid anything which will leave you feeling full or bloated.
• Avoid having daytime naps – this can be difficult if you are very tired and sleep-deprived, but naps during the day can affect the quality of your sleep.
• Try to avoid getting angry or annoyed if you are struggling to get to sleep. If you have been in bed awake for more than 30 minutes, get up and do something quiet and relaxing and then go back to bed when you feel sleepy.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a practice which was developed from meditation, and a lot of recent research has demonstrated it to be effective in helping people with depression and anxiety feel better. There is also research that strongly suggests that ongoing mindfulness practice helps people stay well once they are recovered.

Mindfulness basically involves training the mind to focus and pay attention in a particular way to the present moment and to do so non-judgementally. It can take quite a lot of practice to retrain the mind into good habits, but there is good evidence to show that regular mindfulness practice pays off, and people can experience good benefit from as little as 8 weeks of daily mindfulness practice.

There are two types of mindfulness practice – formal mindfulness meditation and applied mindfulness. Formal mindfulness meditation will need you to set some time (about 5–15 minutes) aside each day, whereas you can easily fit applied mindfulness into your daily life. You will benefit most from a combination of both methods, and from spending about 20 minutes a day on mindfulness practice.

Mindful breathing

The aim of mindful breathing is to develop a calm and non-judging awareness and to allow your thoughts and feelings to come and go without getting caught up in them.

• Sit comfortably, with your spine reasonably straight. It helps to close your eyes.
• Bring your attention to your breathing.
• Notice the sensations in your abdomen as you breathe in and breathe out. Your abdomen rises with the in-breath and falls with the out-breath.
• Thoughts and feelings will come into your mind: that’s OK, because that’s just how the human mind normally works. When thoughts and feelings pop
into your mind, you simply notice them, and then bring your attention back to your breathing.

- Likewise, you will probably become aware of sounds, smells, sensations, and so on. Once again, when this happens, just notice them and then bring your attention back to your breathing. In mindfulness, rather than following these thoughts or feelings, you allow yourself to let them go. You don’t need to judge or criticise yourself for having them, and the purpose is not for you to start analysing your thoughts or feelings – the purpose is simply to recognise that they are OK and just to let them be. When you notice your thoughts and feelings, you just let them drift on by and then bring your attention back to your breathing.

Whenever you notice that your attention has drifted off, simply note that your attention has wandered, and then gently bring it back to your breathing. It is natural for various thoughts and feelings to enter into your awareness and for your mind to start to follow them while you are doing your mindfulness practice. No matter how many times this happens, just keep bringing your attention back to your breathing. Remember, the purpose of mindfulness is gradual retraining of your mind and switching off many of the day-to-day ways of thinking and being we use all the time.

**Mindfulness with emotions**

It can be very beneficial to use mindfulness skills to help manage your emotions. By focusing your attention on your breath, your body and the experience of the emotion, you can learn to take a step back from the emotion and to understand it. The purpose of using mindfulness to manage your feelings is to learn to accept the experience, rather than lessen the distress, although most people find that, in learning not to fear it or struggle against their emotions, this can help reduce the distress they feel. The process of using mindfulness with feeling involves noticing, naming, accepting and exploring your emotions.

To do this mindfulness practice, set aside a few minutes when you can be quiet and won’t be disturbed. Start by bringing your attention to your breath. Notice your breathing and the sensations in your abdomen as you breathe in and out. Spend a few moments just noticing your breathing.

- First, notice what you are feeling and what that feels like.
- Next, name the emotion: what is it? What word best describes what you are feeling (for example, angry, sad, anxious, irritated, scared, frustrated. . .)?
- Then accept the emotion. It’s normal to have lots of feelings, both pleasant and unpleasant. It can be helpful to understand what triggered the feeling and the set of circumstances that contributed to you feeling this way. Don’t condone or judge the emotion. Simply let it move through you without resisting it, struggling against it or encouraging it.
- Finally, explore the emotion. How intensely do you feel it? How are you breathing as you feel the emotion? What are you feeling in your body? Where
do you feel it? What is happening to your posture when you feel this emotion? Where do you notice muscle tension? What expression do you have on your face when you feel this? As you pay attention to your feeling, does it change in any way (sometimes it will, sometimes it won’t)? If you find that your feeling changes, notice how it changes. Does it change in intensity or where in your body you feel it, or does it change to a different feeling?

- What thoughts or judgements do you notice? Just notice those thoughts. Allow them to come into your mind, and allow them to pass. Any time you find that you’re engaging with the thoughts – judging them or yourself for having them, believing them, struggling against them – just notice that process and bring your attention back to your breathing, and to the sensations you are experiencing in your body. If any other emotions come up, if anything changes, simply notice and repeat the steps above. At first, it can be difficult to do this if you feel upset but, as you become more practised, you can use this mindfulness technique when you feel more intense emotion.

Applied mindfulness – incorporating mindfulness practice into your day-to-day life

The principle of applied mindfulness is very simple – it is about deepening your engagement with the world, on really focusing on what you are doing and on being ‘in the moment’. When you are using mindfulness, you will find that your mind keeps wandering – this is normal and nothing to worry about. If you notice that your mind has wandered, or you’ve started thinking about something else, just notice what it is that distracted you, and then gently bring your attention back to the exercise. Repeatedly letting go of distractions and bringing your attention back when it has wandered are key parts of mindfulness practice.

With applied mindfulness, your aim is to practise for just a few minutes at a time, but at frequent intervals throughout the day.

- Take an extra minute in the shower.
- Listen to sounds in the environment.
- Pay attention to the different sensations you are aware of all through your body.
- Pay attention to your posture at any given moment.
- ‘Slow walking’: slow down your walking speed and become aware of the flow of movement through your body.
- ‘Slow eating’: eat silently and more slowly than usual and become aware of all the colours, flavours and textures of your food.
- ‘Mindful housework’: you can even use mindfulness when you are doing the housework and turn your chores into an opportunity to be in the moment.

Note