Depression and self-worth

Depression

Depression is quite common in ADHD but can sometimes not be spotted because both depression and ADHD can show some similar symptoms: problems with concentration, memory and sleeping, mood changes and irritability. Both ADHD and depression make it difficult to get going on tasks and to complete them.

People who are depressed have other symptoms as well – they don’t enjoy life as much as they used to. They may feel sad or empty or even irritable and angry. They don’t feel like themselves and lose interest in activities that they would normally enjoy. Depression can affect appetite, causing people to either eat too much or not enough.

People with ADHD may be more likely to become depressed or down on themselves:

- Because they may experience more adverse events.
- Because they may have more problems with relationships.
- Because of their views about themselves.
- Due to poor sleep or poor coping methods.

The more you feel depressed or anxious, the more your thinking can become negative and often less rational. You will also have what we call “negative automatic thoughts”, such as “Oh no, she hates me” or “I’ll never manage it.” These happen automatically, without you even noticing, and help keep low mood going as you think they are true. You may ruminate, looking
back over life thinking about all the things that could have been, should have been, might have been or that were but aren’t anymore. You may have an ‘internal bully,’ constantly criticising yourself. This happens in anyone who gets depressed, but in ADHD the thoughts can race around your mind.

Symptoms of depression

*Are you experiencing any of these?*

- Feeling down, low and hopeless
- Feeling tired, having little energy
- Poor appetite or overeating
- Feeling bad about yourself, that you have failed, or are worthless
- Loss of sexual drive, increased difficulty with falling or staying asleep
- Thoughts that others would be better off without you, or that life isn’t worth living
- Loss of meaning and purpose in living

Thoughts, feelings and behaviours in depression

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Core Belief
E.g. “I’m useless”

Thought
“I have to prove myself”

Behaviour
Work too hard

Feeling
Tired

Thought
“I can’t do it”

Behaviour
Not trying

Feeling
Hopeless, sad
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Self-worth

Many people with ADHD will have had negative and frustrating experiences growing up. You may have had negative reactions from others such as teachers, parents or your peers, just at the time you were trying to find your place in the world and derive a sense of belonging and acceptance. Adults with ADHD can have a strong sense that they have not achieved their potential, with a frustration about how much harder they have to work than others. Sometimes rather than fail at a task, they may bury their head in the sand and not try. All of this contributes to feelings of low self-worth.

Life experiences contribute to the development of the core beliefs that you hold. These beliefs form very early on and often negatively influence your sense of self. Some of them are helpful (e.g. “I am loveable”) but some much less so (e.g. “I am stupid”).

Other examples of common negative core beliefs observed in adults with ADHD are:

- **Self-mistrust**
  “I cannot rely on myself, I always get it wrong”

- **Inadequacy**
  “I am basically a bad, useless person”

- **Incompetence**
  “I am too impractical to handle everyday life”

- **Failure**
  “I have not met everyone’s expectations. I always fail”

- **Instability**
  “My life will always be chaotic and in turmoil”

*These ideas colour your view of the world and act like a template. We see only the information that fits this view, or twist that information until it does fit. If you have a failure belief and do well on a test, you may tell yourself and others that it was just because it was an easy paper, a fluke,*
or just because you had revised the right things by good luck. This keeps the idea that you are a failure going and makes it very resistant to change.

In the same way, if we hold a prejudice such as “Women are poor drivers,” we tend to notice every example of female driving which confirms our view, but miss, or dismiss, every example which challenges it. We can think in similarly biased ways about ourselves, and discount positive (or negative) information or feedback about ourselves. This serves to maintain our ideas about ourselves even if they are not accurate.

Our views of ourselves then affect how we respond to events. We are less likely to handle difficulties well if we believe they are our fault or that we are unable to cope with them. We are less likely to take up opportunities if we think we will fail.

**What you can do**

Seek to accept yourself as you are, to give yourself a break and not be so hard on yourself. Expect that some things will be difficult and that you may have more setbacks than other people do. Choose your battles, knowing you won’t win everything, and that you don’t have to be perfect.

**Get your ADHD treated.** While ADHD may have fuelled your depression, the good news is that addressing ADHD has the potential to really turn things around. However, if you have severe depression, that should be treated first, as a priority. There is not usually a problem with taking ADHD medication and most kinds of antidepressants at the same time.

**Spend time with people who love and support you.** It is easy to hide away when you are feeling low, but don’t.

**Get more physically active and do more enjoyable activities.** Especially try to spend time outdoors.
Notice and challenge your negative thoughts. Remember thoughts are just thoughts, not facts.

Notice and value your good qualities, your achievements and what you have. Actively look out for things to be grateful for, perhaps keeping a diary of positive experiences.

Practise mindfulness and be kind to yourself.

Seek to perform acts of kindness and helpfulness to others. This helps to connect with others and releases oxytocin, a mood-boosting hormone.

Re-evaluate your basic ideas about yourself and your core beliefs, in the new light of knowing that you have ADHD. Some of your ideas and beliefs may have resulted from ADHD symptoms.

Get more achievement, fun and exercise into your life!

When you feel down, it is easy to sit around doing very little and putting everything off. You feel incapable of doing the things that need to be done, yet you feel even worse if they are left undone. Getting just a few things accomplished helps a lot:

- Make a list of the things you need to do.
- Plan to do one thing which is not too difficult.
- Break that task down into small steps, accepting that it may feel hard.
- Encourage yourself as you go and congratulate yourself when it’s done.

What would be one thing you could do to improve your mood?

Doing more of the things you like to do

It is easy to think that jobs are important, or other people’s needs are important, but sometimes it’s difficult to prioritise enjoyment for ourselves. When we are feeling down, nothing is enjoyable anyway, but if we never make time for pleasant activities, depression is a likely result. Think of
things you like to do, or used to like in the past, or might like to try. They can be simple or grand, free or cost money, time consuming or take only minutes:

- Listen to music
- Telephone a friend
- Clean out a cupboard
- Hug Someone
- Write a story
- Take a nature walk
- Go to the hairdressers
- Paint a room
- Sit in the fresh air
- Read a book

Exercise

**Physical activity** is very important in depression as it increases levels of neurotransmitters, which are natural antidepressants. There is substantial evidence that exercise improves mood and releases tension, as well as being good for your health and sleep pattern.

- Using exercise machines
- Netball
- Cycling
- Playing with the children
- Mowing the lawn
- Football
- Dancing
- Jogging
- Walking the dog

When choosing what to try, it is important to **FOCUS ON ONE THING AT A TIME**, and don’t overwhelm yourself.

More on challenging negative thoughts

Everyone has negative thoughts when they feel depressed. Research has shown that they usually:

- Arise automatically
- Are extreme or distorted
- Are unhelpful
- Are taken as true and not questioned

*But thoughts are not facts! Learn to stand back from them and see them for what they are.*
Here are typical ways in which thoughts can be distorted or unhelpful:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distortion</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jumping to conclusions</td>
<td>Negative interpretations in the absence of facts, predicting the future, mind reading, “I won’t pass this course”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All or nothing thinking</td>
<td>You see everything as ‘black’ or ‘white’. “I can’t finish anything”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Over-generalising</td>
<td>Generalising from one event. “I always annoy everyone”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catastrophising</td>
<td>Thinking the worst will happen, exaggerating. “My wife is bound to leave me now”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalising</td>
<td>Blaming yourself for everything, thinking that people’s behaviour is due to something you have done. “She ignored me in the street because of my tactless remark last week”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative focus</td>
<td>Ignoring or discounting the positive in a situation “That part of my report was really weak”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoulds and oughts</td>
<td>Having strict rules about how you should behave, without thinking about whether these are realistic, leading to pressure. “I should always finish what’s on my list”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional reasoning</td>
<td>“I feel it so it must be true”</td>
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Notice the thoughts – now challenge them. Don’t take them lying down or they will get you down!

Try to spot what the thoughts that were going through your mind as you felt sad were, and perhaps write them down. Now question them.
Here are some useful questions:

**What is the evidence for the thoughts?** Are they true?

**What would someone else think about this?** What would my sensible friend say? What would I say to someone else in the same situation?

**Is the thought distorted?** Am I catastrophising or blaming myself for something which is not my fault?

**What is the worst possible outcome?** How bad would it really be? What would be the best outcome? The most likely outcome?

### For example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thought</th>
<th>Counter-Argument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“There is no point in trying – I'm bound to fail again.” (predicting the future)</td>
<td>“If I don’t try, I won’t know. Trying will broaden my experience. I'm not expected to do it perfectly.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Everybody is having a better time than me at this party – everyone else is happy.” (Over-generalising)</td>
<td>“I don’t know this. Just because they seem to be enjoying themselves today does not mean they are more satisfied. Everyone has difficulties.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some people experience an internal dialogue which feels like a critical voice. Does the voice tell the truth? Whose voice might it be? Remember that you do not have to go along with the messages it gives you.

### Other approaches

**Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is an alternative approach to depression, anxiety or other difficult feelings. Mindfulness is paying attention to the present moment without making judgements. Thoughts and feelings are seen as events in the mind or body, transient like passing clouds in the sky, which do not necessarily reflect truth or reality. You just accept that you have had the thoughts and stand back from them with curiosity and detachment: you do not have to go where they take you; you do not have to respond in any way; you do not have to think about whether they are true or allow them to affect you.
Learning to use this approach can take practice, but in time, is of proven usefulness.

**Self-acceptance and care**

It is important to think of yourself with compassion — being warm and kind towards yourself, accepting yourself even with all your faults and failings. We often criticise and condemn ourselves, which activates the threat system and anxiety, and further affects our ability to function well. This is how our brain works, but we now know that there are other brain systems we can use to reduce these tendencies. Rather than attack yourself, you can try to shift your perspective to how you would think about someone else in the situation. How would you understand them and show warmth and kindness to them? You can learn to evoke those feelings and try to turn them on yourself, to soothe yourself as you would someone you cared for.

**Think again about the core beliefs that bring you down**

*Are the ideas actually correct?* They can be very difficult to change — you may have held these beliefs all your life. Now that you have put them into words, you can start to challenge them. What is the evidence for the beliefs? Are they really true? What do other people say? What would be a more helpful way of seeing things?

**Do you behave differently to try to compensate for or disprove these ideas? (Your rules for living)**

All the time you follow the rules, you do not find out that the underlying ideas may be wrong. For example, if someone did not talk about their views, because they thought others would think they were stupid, but tried out speaking about them, they might find out that their colleagues agreed. Can you allow yourself, as an experiment, to believe that these ideas and ‘rules’ may be wrong, and try acting differently?

Changing how you feel about yourself is not easy and can take a lot of time and effort. At the very least you can try to be aware of your unhelpful beliefs and rules and try not to go along.
with them – be mindful that your brain generates these ideas, but you do not have to take them seriously; you can accept yourself and treat yourself kindly.

**What are your assets?**

**Remember your strengths**

- If you are hyperactive, you may get lots done and be good at sports.
- If you are impulsive, you may be creative, dynamic, entrepreneurial.
- Distractible people notice things others don’t and may be intuitive.
- If you are inattentive, you don’t pay attention to unimportant things and may be able to hyper-focus on important ones.
- You may be creative, good at having original ideas and making connections.
- You may be able to cope in chaotic situations that bother others.
- You may take risks and accomplish things that others are afraid to try.
- You may be independent, ambitious, innovative, adaptive.

*Look for your positive traits. Ask others if necessary.*

**What have been your best achievements?**