

Dealing with depressive thinking

What is depressive thinking?

When you are depressed there are changes in the way you think, as well as in how you feel. You tend to look on the black side of everything, see the worst in yourself, in your life and your future. Once you are feeling down, you are more likely to remember the bad things that have happened and ignore the good ones. Negative thinking can also trigger depression and it slows down recovery. Everyone has negative thoughts, but they also have positive ones. A healthy balance seems to be about two positive thoughts to 1 negative one. When you are depressed, this balance is disturbed. You may also have thoughts that are distorted and don't fit the facts, such as 'I am a waste of space' and 'I am a complete failure'.

Have you noticed differences in the way people think about events? Can you relate to the example below?

A colleague was promoted at work rather than you...

Person A

She is more experienced
She has been here longer
She has the necessary skills
It will be my turn next time

Person B

I will never get promoted
I am not appreciated
I am not liked
I am worthless

Disappointment

Prolonged unhappiness

Learning to recognise unrealistic, negative thoughts and to balance them with more realistic, positive ones can be very helpful. However, changing your way of thinking is quite difficult at first and you will need to keep working at it. It may help to enlist the help of someone you trust.

Identifying negative thinking

Negative thoughts can be difficult to spot because they become a habit, they can flash quickly into your mind and most of us are not used to noticing our thoughts. Learning to spot and catch these negative thoughts is a skill you can master with time.

When you are depressed, you tend to think in particular ways that are distorted in a negative way. These are called 'thinking errors'. Here are some common examples. Try to spot the ones which apply to you. Mark them in the box.

- Thinking the worst, eg your boy/girl friend doesn't phone. You assume they don't like you any more.
- Thinking that everything is going wrong when only one thing has gone wrong (over-generalizing). For example, you make one mistake at work and think 'I'll never succeed. I can't do anything'.
- Ignoring the positive and only seeing the negative, eg 'The shelves I put up are no good because a screw fell out.'
- Arguing away anything positive, eg 'He said he liked what I did because he is sorry for me'.
- Making negative predictions, eg 'It's no good my doing that, I'm bound to fail. It will be a disaster'.
- Taking things personally and blaming yourself for what others do, eg 'My son failed that exam. I should have helped him more. I am a bad parent' or 'My partner has left me. I am no good'.
- Exaggerating the negative, eg 'This is a complete disaster, a total failure'.

You may also have beliefs about yourself and about how the world is and should be that are unrealistic. These beliefs may be making it harder for you to deal with the problems in your life and so may be contributing to your depression. Here are some examples of beliefs that make people more likely to get depressed.

- I should be happy all the time.
- To be a good person, I have to be nice to everyone
- If someone is hurt by something I say or do, I am a bad person.
- If I show emotion, it means that I am weak
- It is shameful for me to show any sign of weakness.
- If someone does not like me, it means there is something wrong with me.
- If I argue or disagree, people won't like me
- If I am criticised, it means I am wrong
- If I don't succeed, I am worthless
- I cannot handle it when things go wrong