

HOW TO ... improve your mental wellbeing



Mental Health
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HOW TO ... improve your mental wellbeing

This booklet explains what keeps people mentally well, why some people may be more prone to mental distress and what you can do to promote your mental wellbeing. It also suggests how you can care for someone who has mental health problems, while also looking after your own needs.



What do we mean by good mental health?

Good mental health isn't something you have but something you do. To be mentally healthy you must value and accept yourself. This means that:

- You care about yourself and you care for yourself. You love yourself, not hate yourself. You look after your physical health – eat well, sleep well, exercise and enjoy yourself.
- You see yourself as being a valuable person in your own right. You don't have to earn the right to exist. You exist, so you have the right to exist.
- You judge yourself on reasonable standards. You don't set yourself impossible goals, such as 'I have to be perfect in everything I do', and then punish yourself when you don't reach those goals.

If you don't value and accept yourself, you are always frightened that other people will reject you. To prevent people seeing how unacceptable you are, you keep them at a distance, and so you are always frightened and lonely. If you value yourself, you don't expect people to reject you. You aren't frightened of other people. You can be open and so you enjoy good relationships.

If you value and accept yourself, you are able to relax and enjoy yourself without feeling guilty. When you face a crisis you know that, no matter how difficult the situation is, you will manage. How we see ourselves is central to every decision we make. People who value and accept themselves cope with life.

Why do some people become mentally distressed when others don't?

We suffer mental distress when we don't value and accept ourselves. This way of thinking usually comes from childhood when we decided that we must be bad and unacceptable, otherwise our family would not have treated us as they did. This makes it very difficult for us to cope with the difficulties and disasters we encounter.



All of us grow up with a set of ideas about who we are, what our life was and will be, and what the world is like. These ideas come from our past experience, and, because no two people ever have the same experience, no two people ever see things in exactly the same way. Our ideas aren't an exact picture of what's going on around us, but a set of guesses or theories about what's going on. If we grow up believing that the world is as we see it, then we're greatly shocked when we discover that things aren't the way we thought they were and that we've made a serious error of judgement.

Whenever we encounter some unexpected disaster, we discover that there's a serious discrepancy between what we thought our life was and what it actually is. Perhaps, like many Americans, we thought our life was safe and secure, and then we suffered a terrorist attack. Perhaps we thought we were going to spend the rest of our life with one special person, and then that person left us, or died. Perhaps we'd grown up believing that if we were good, nothing bad would happen to us, and then something did.

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Whenever we discover we've made a serious error of judgement, we start to doubt every judgement we've ever made. Then we start to feel very shaky. We feel that we're crumbling, falling apart, disappearing. If we value and accept ourselves, we have confidence in ourselves, and, even though we're frightened, we tell ourselves that this feeling will pass, that we'll be able to meet the challenge and cope with whatever follows. If we don't value and feel positive about ourselves in this way, we feel that we're about to be annihilated as a person. We feel that we'll be wiped out and vanish like a drop of water falling into the ocean. We then become utterly terrified.

Whenever we fear that we are going to be annihilated, we have to find some defence to hold ourselves together. The less good we feel about ourselves, the more desperate the defence we resort to.

These defences might include:

- harming our body by injuring it or by starving it
- blaming ourselves for the disaster, and so becoming depressed
- locating the cause of our fear in the world around us and becoming too frightened to venture out
- rushing into the world around us and getting busier and busier
- trying to make everything secure by obsessively cleaning and checking
- retreating into our own inner world and giving up trying to make sense of the world around us in the way other people do.

We don't consciously choose a particular defence. Instead, we unconsciously and quickly resort to the one defence available to us because of the way we see ourselves and our world. For instance, if you are well practised in blaming yourself for everything that goes wrong, you'll blame yourself for the disaster that has befallen you.

Am I inevitably going to be mentally distressed?

Mental distress is not compulsory. However, if we don't value and accept ourselves, we're making sure that we will feel mental distress when life is difficult. If we do feel positive about ourselves, then when we suffer loss, we feel sad, not depressed. So, when someone treats us badly, we feel angry, but not guilty because we feel angry. When someone or something threatens us, we feel frightened, but we're not overwhelmed, because we look after ourselves and make ourselves safe.



What causes us to become mentally distressed is not loss, or poverty, or sickness, or people treating us badly. It's how we interpret our loss, or poverty, or sickness, or the fact that people are treating us badly.

Many people defeat themselves by interpreting what happens to them in way that make suffering inevitable. If we see ourselves as being bad and unacceptable and we believe that we live in a 'just world' where goodness is rewarded and badness punished, then, when we suffer a disaster, we interpret the disaster as being the punishment for our wickedness. If we see ourselves as being insignificant and worthless then, when the chance for happiness comes along, we say to ourselves, 'I wasn't meant to be happy.' If we are frightened of other people, when other people treat us badly we feel we've no right to stand up for ourselves.

If we desperately need other people around us, but see ourselves as unattractive and unlovable, we bury our anger. We let other people walk all over us because we dare not show our displeasure in case other people reject us. If we believe that it's inevitable that other people will let us down and everything turn out badly, we'll not do anything to improve our life. So we suffer.

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Some people like to blame their genes or their stars for their misery, because then it seems that they're not responsible for what has happened to them. Many doctors like to blame some undiscovered gene or biochemical change for their patients' misery. This is because such doctors feel more comfortable with medical interpretations of events than with psychological interpretations. However, despite the huge amount of time, money and effort that has been spent in the search for the genes or the biochemical changes that cause mental disorders, none has been discovered.

Serotonin levels

Changes in serotonin levels have been found in the brains of people who are depressed. But a cause must precede an event, and no biochemical change has been found to precede the onset of depression. It is not correct to say that depression is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. If a certain drug makes a person feel better, it doesn't follow that the person's distress was caused by the lack of that drug. The fact that the aspirin cures a headache doesn't mean that the headache was caused by a lack of aspirin.

Genetics

It's often claimed that research shows that depression is inherited. But analysis of this research still leaves this open to question. We do get a lot from our parents, but most of it is through learning. We can learn from our family ways of thinking that lead to distress. If a mother is constantly frightened and pessimistic, her child is likely to grow up believing that the world is a terrible place, and so the child becomes frightened and pessimistic.

If I'm feeling mentally fragile, what can be done to help?

Accept that you can change. Nobody stays the same, so you may as well change for the better. The big change that you need to make is to come to value and accept yourself. If you've spent most of your life believing that you're unacceptable and of little value, it's hard to change because all your ideas and ways of behaving are based on that assumption.



The trick is to say to yourself, 'I don't think much of myself, but from now on I'm going to act as if I'm my own best friend. I'm going to be kind to myself, look after myself, and stop criticising myself and putting myself down.' Acting as if you're your own best friend will lead you to become your own best friend.

You need to be very aware of how you talk to yourself. Listen to the voice in your head. Write down the hurtful, critical things that voice says to you, and then think of better, kinder, more encouraging things to say to yourself. For instance, when you have to do something, if you always say to yourself, 'You're sure to fail. You always make a mess of everything you do', write that down, and then beside it put, 'You're going to do the best you possibly can. It doesn't matter if you don't get it perfectly right, because the good thing about making mistakes is that you learn from them.' Now practise saying that and other encouraging things to yourself.

Question the assumptions on which you base your ideas. Is it really true that everybody in the whole world hates you, or that everything you've ever done has turned out badly? Is it really true that every unfortunate thing that happens to you is your punishment for being such a wicked person? Look at the consequences of your ideas. If you don't get close to anyone because you fear being rejected, doesn't it follow that you will always be lonely?

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Try to remember how you came to think of yourself as being bad. Is this what your parents always told you? Were you really bad, or were they taking their bad feelings out on you? Are you frightened to recognise that your parents weren't perfect? No parents are ever perfect.

Writing these things down puts what you're thinking and feeling outside of yourself, and you can see it more clearly. Books can be helpful. Try reading not just self-help books but well-written novels, poetry and biography.

Talk it through

Talk about these things to other people and find out how they see things. Talk to friends, call at a local drop-in centre, join a self-help group. Talking to a therapist or counsellor can be very helpful. There are many different kinds of therapies, but they all fall into one of two groups. There are prescriptive therapies and exploratory therapies. Prescriptive therapies, such as cognitive therapy, teach skills to overcome specific problems. Exploratory therapies, such as psychotherapy, explore your ideas and your experiences. Most therapists and counsellors use a bit of both.

Finding a therapist or counsellor can be difficult. Ask your GP whether there's a counsellor at the health centre or whether she or he can refer you to an NHS psychologist or psychotherapist. See what your local Mind association has to offer. Look through the registers of psychotherapists and counsellors at your local library. The fact that a psychotherapist's or counsellor's name is on a register isn't a guarantee that the person is an effective psychotherapist or counsellor. But it does mean that if something goes wrong, you can complain to that person's professional organisation. No therapist or counsellor can wave a magic wand and make you better, but they can act as a guide on your journey of self-discovery.

What can I do about the things I can't change?

Remember, it's not what happens to us that causes our distress but how we interpret what happens to us. If your mother always belittles and hurts you, and if you believe it's a law of the universe that you have to see her every week, then you make sure that you suffer. If you know that there isn't such a law and it's your responsibility to look after yourself, then you'll strictly limit how often and for how long you see her. You'll create an emotional distance between yourself and her by seeing her not as your mother, but as a stupid woman who prefers the immediate satisfaction of taking her bad feelings out on someone, to the long-term satisfaction of having a loving child who wants to be with her.



Often we go on seeing parents who hurt us because we haven't given up the hope that one day they'll turn into the loving, accepting parents we always wanted. Some parents do become wiser, but don't know how to show it. You can test this out by asking them to talk over events in your childhood. You're not seeking to blame them, just wanting to get some things straight in your mind. Some parents are pleased to do this. They say, 'Those bad things did happen. I'm sorry'. Other parents who haven't become wiser say, 'How dare you suggest I wasn't perfect!'

If that's what your parents say, then you may have to give up hope of having loving, accepting parents. This is sad, but don't let this sadness and disappointment dominate your life. Find an interpretation of what has happened with which you can live. This is what you need to do with all the things in your life that you can't change. Don't let these things dominate your life, taking up all your time and effort. Even when life is at its most difficult, make sure that every day you give yourself something nice. This could be a treat, or time to do nothing but rest, chat with a friend, look at nature, or listen to music. Even if nobody else is looking after you, you can look after yourself.

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How can I stay well while caring for others who are in mental distress?

People who have gone through a period of mental distress will often say afterwards how much they appreciated having someone who was there for them, who encouraged and supported them, even though they did not show their appreciation at the time.

People in mental distress are struggling to hold themselves together as a person. It's a fight for survival, and so all of us in this situation become extremely selfish. We can't see anything of what other people are going through, and so we become very difficult to live with. We see everything in stark terms, in black and white, with no shades of grey. Our sense of humour vanishes, and the most ordinary things become sources of anxiety, even terror. We can be quite reasonable one minute and totally unreasonable the next. Friends and family, no matter how loving and concerned they are, must protect themselves from us.

If you're looking after someone in mental distress, it's vital that you have time to yourself to recover, to rest, and to enjoy some recreation. You shouldn't feel guilty about this. If you don't look after yourself, you'll be unable to look after anyone else.

When we see someone suffering anxiety, fear and despair, or being depressed, or hearing horrible voices, we long to take their suffering away from them. However, we shouldn't feel that it's our duty to make the person better, and that if they don't get better that we have failed. The truth is, only one person has the power to make that person better. We can give support and encouragement, we can give love and comfort, we can listen and try to understand, and all this can help the person. But it's the person who has to decide to change.

The person has to accept that he can change, and then to risk changing, that is, to act without guarantees or certainty about what change will mean. This isn't easy. Many of us decide to stay with the devil we know because, painful though that is, we feel secure in our misery because we know what it is. It takes courage to decide to change.

I know many people who found that courage and now enjoy their life. All of them were very different people, living in very different circumstances, but each of them can say what was the important wisdom they learnt. It was, 'I am responsible for myself. The only person who can save me is me. I value and accept myself, and so I look after myself.'

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Useful organisations

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies

PO Box 9, Accrington BB5 0XB

tel. 01254 875277, fax: 01254 239114

e-mail: info@babcp.com, web: www.babcp.com

Has a register of qualified members

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

1 Regent Place, Rugby, Warwicks CV21 2PJ

tel. 0870 443 5252, fax: 0870 443 5160

minicom: 0870 443 5162, e-mail: bac@bac.co.uk

web: www.counselling.co.uk

Has a register of qualified members

British Confederation of Psychotherapists

37 Mapesbury Road, London NW2 4HJ

tel. 020 8830 5173, fax: 020 8452 3684

e-mail: mail@bcp.org.uk, web: www.bcp.org.uk

A linking body of psychoanalytical psychotherapy societies.

Has a register of qualified members

Carers UK

20–25 Glasshouse Yard, London EC1A 4JT

carers line: 0808 808 7777, tel. 020 7490 8818

minicom: 020 7251 8969, fax: 020 7490 8824

e-mail: info@ukcarers.org, web: www.carersuk.demon.co.uk

Information and advice on all aspects of caring



Relate

Herbert Gray College, Little Church Street, Rugby CV21 3AP
tel. 01788 573241, fax: 01788 535007

web: www.relate.org.uk

Offers counselling for adults with relationship difficulties

UK Council for Psychotherapy

167–169 Great Portland Street

London W1W 5PF

tel. 020 7436 3002, fax: 020 7436 3013

web: www.psychotherapy.org.uk

Umbrella organisation for psychotherapy in UK. It maintains a voluntary register of professionally qualified psychotherapists

References



Beyond Fear D. Rowe (HarperCollins 1996)

Breaking the Bonds D. Rowe (HarperCollins 1996)

Depression: The Way Out of Your Prison D. Rowe (Routledge 2002)

Guide to Life D. Rowe (HarperCollins 1996)

The Origins of Unhappiness D. Small (Constable & Robinson 2002)

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Further reading and order form

- Confidence Works* G. McMahon (Sheldon Press 2001) £6.99
- Depression: The way out of your prison* D. Rowe (Routledge 1996) £10.99
- Essential Help for Your Nerves* Dr C. Weekes (Thorsons 2000) £8.99
- How to Accept Yourself* Dr W. Dryden (Sheldon Press 1999) £6.99
- How to Assert Yourself* (Mind 2000) £1
- How to Cope with Relationship Problems* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to Increase Your Self-esteem* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to Look After Yourself* (Mind 1999) £1
- How to Stop Worrying* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to Survive Family Life* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to Survive Mid-life Crisis* (Mind 2002) £1
- Making Sense of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy* (Mind 2001) £3.50
- Making the Most of Your Relationships: How to find satisfaction and intimacy with family and friends* W. Stewart (How to Books 2001) £7.99
- Manage Your Mind: The mental health fitness guide* G. Butler, T. Hope (Oxford University Press 1995) £9.99
- Overcoming Low Self-esteem: A self-help guide using cognitive-behavioural techniques* M. Fennell (Robinson 1999) £7.99
- Shift your Thinking, Change your Life* (Sheldon Press 2001) £6.99
- So You Think You're Mad* P. Hewitt (Handsell 2001) £10.50
- The Assertiveness Workbook: How to express your ideas and stand up for yourself at work and in relationships* R. J. Paterson (New Harbinger Press 2000) £12.99
- The Mind Guide to Managing Stress* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind Guide to Physical Activity* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind Guide to Relaxation* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Nature of Unhappiness* D. Smail (Constable and Robinson 2001) £10.99
- Understanding Anxiety* (Mind 2001) £1
- Understanding Depression* (Mind 2001) £1
- Understanding Talking Treatments* (Mind 2000) £1

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Mind works for a better life for everyone with experience of mental distress

Mind does this by:

- advancing the views, needs and ambitions of people with experience of mental distress
- promoting inclusion through challenging discrimination
- influencing policy through campaigning and education
- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education.

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:
autonomy, equality, knowledge, participation and respect.

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: 0845 7660 163 Monday to Friday 9.15am–5.15pm.

For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line. TYPETALK is available for people with hearing or speech problems who have access to a minicom. To make a call via TYPETALK dial 0800 959598, fax: 0151 709 8119.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000.

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 02890 328474.



This booklet was written by Dorothy Rowe

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