

Introducing CBT for Low Mood and Depression

Part 2: Six Troublesome Thoughts and How to Respond

This is the second in a series of podcasts intended to give you some practical ideas from cognitive behavioural therapy for improving low mood and depression. The first focused on behaviour; in this one we're going to look at the "cognitive" bit of CBT, which basically means: thoughts.

Depression is categorised as a disorder of mood for good reason: it typically comes with a whole host of potent and persistent feelings. But it also plays havoc with your thinking, and indeed the thought processes shaping our experiences are an important driver of our moods and emotional responses to situations. This idea is really the cornerstone of CBT: how you think, and the meaning you attach to your experiences, affects how you feel. Say you get some critical feedback on an essay or problem sheet. What might you think? Well, often in depression thoughts tend towards the self-critical: perhaps you're calling yourself "stupid" or "lazy", or even "I haven't got what it takes", "I don't belong here". You probably don't have to imagine how those kinds of thoughts are going to make you feel. Compare that with someone who thinks: "that's a shame, but hey – it's only one essay, there's some useful learning there, but first - I'm going to need a bit of cheering up". Very different thought process, right? And very different emotional and behavioural consequences. This might all sound a bit obvious: of course, different people have different reactions to things don't they? But I invite you to really take a moment to sit with that knowledge. Because the fantastic thing here is that if there are different ways of thinking about things that happen, there is the possibility of change. Maybe the harsh stories that play and re-play in your mind can be re-written. Maybe you can ignore them completely.

Now you might be thinking: hang on a minute, what's happened to me or what I'm going through right now *is* depressing and would be for anyone, I can't just change the way I think about it and that's that. Of course you can't. And of course there are good reasons why you're feeling the way you are (I talk more about this in the first podcast). The thing with depression though is that it's very good at rubbing salt in the wound. When it really takes hold, it begins to take on a life of its own – it has its own momentum, its tricks and tactics and it becomes really hard to unstick yourself from it. And it's then that it starts to interfere with your thoughts, because it doesn't just point out the problems, it blames you for them, it convinces you they'll be here forever, it creeps and grows and robs you of the things that are sustaining and might help you bounce back. In any situation, there are always some ways of thinking that are more helpful and compassionate and some that are less so. Depression steers you away from self-compassion. It takes practice to spot this happening and steer it back the other way.

In this podcast I'm going to outline some of the common thoughts – or clusters of thoughts really – that come with low mood and depression, and suggest some ways to respond. You may find that some of these thoughts are more relevant to you than others, and you may feel more drawn to some techniques over others – that's absolutely fine. There is no right and wrong here, and the techniques aren't really specific to the thoughts, so go with what works for you.

1. It's all gone wrong

Thinking back to that example of the essay or problem-sheet feedback, what I have in mind here is a whole set of thoughts which share a focus on disappointment and evaluation. These could be thoughts about something you've done or something that's happened: the exam that didn't go to plan, the relationship that didn't work out. Or they could be more general, thoughts about a time when you felt happier, freer, more successful; sometimes when depression itself becomes the focus of awareness a whole bunch of secondary feelings emerge *about* how you're feeling right now. Now in itself, noticing a gap between how things are and how you'd ideally like them to be needn't be such a bad thing. It might be a painful realisation, but it *could* in theory be met with sympathy towards yourself, right? It could be an energising thought, spurring you towards what you want. But usually in depression it doesn't go that way. Usually, there is some sub-text to this thought that says: "and it's my fault", or "I'm weak" or "it'll never get better", or something similar, something much more personal and, frankly, unreasonable. It's not just the one exam that went badly; it's your whole academic prospects. It's not just that relationship, it's your fundamental capacity to have one. And so, my first piece of advice: watch out for the sub-text. Practice tuning into your thoughts and listen to what they're saying. Now thoughts don't typically present themselves in the form of neat sentences like this – often they're fleeting, not particularly conscious, and occur as part of the tapestry of unfolding experience. But teasing out exactly what thoughts are around for you can be helpful in helping you train your mind to think differently. CBT therapists will often recommend writing your thoughts down. Practice doing this when your mood shifts: ask yourself, what's going through my mind right now? What's the sub-text that's really bringing me down?

2. It's doomed to go badly

Our minds are very good at looking ahead: they're constantly speculating and predicting. They're also very good at responding to signs of threat or risk. These faculties are both important but, together, they can lead us into tricky territory, generating worries and doubts when they're not all that helpful. With all the pressures and challenges you face at university and in life generally, there is abundant opportunity to question yourself, your worth and belonging. Think back to Freshers Week; for all the buzz and excitement, often this is a time of real anxiety and self-consciousness. In depression, it's like this threat-detection system goes into overdrive. We know from decades of research that people with low mood are more prone to pessimistic thinking. As a result, they start to avoid things and the result is a more constricted lifestyle. Some theorists see depression as an evolved mechanism to inhibit confidence and exploration at times of perceived threat. It's like the mind has become convinced that this is a time to lie low, cut your losses. So all those emails from the various societies you subscribed to in Fresher's week go unread, the idea of trying something new feels laden with dread. Finding ways to challenge pessimistic predictions is really important in enabling you to engage effectively with things that might help. Here are some suggestions for ways to respond.

- Recognise that this thought, "it's doomed to go badly", may be trying to protect you from hurt or disappointment, and so part of you may be resistant to challenging it. Ask yourself this: if challenging the thought feels risky, what are the risks to not challenging it?
- Recognise that depression may well be exaggerating the risk, and underestimating your ability to cope. It may take some cognitive work to redress the balance.
- Scrutinise the thought: what evidence is there that things will go badly? Is there any evidence to the contrary that is being side-lined? Try writing this down, weigh up the

evidence and see if you can come up with a more balanced thought, one that does justice to your coping resources, one that allows for setbacks and mistakes, for learning and growth.

- It's quite reasonable to acknowledge that some things may be harder than before, for lots of reasons. Try not to set yourself up for failure – recognise that depression is tough, and try to think – with kindness and compassion, always with kindness and compassion – about what is do-able right now. If getting up at 5am to go rowing in the freezing cold feels unappealing, that's OK.

3. I've messed up (like the stupid idiot I am)

So often, for people who are depressed, there is a persistent tendency to see themselves in a negative light and to be, at some level, on the lookout for reasons to criticise themselves. And depression has a nasty trick here: it makes you feel miserable, and then it blames you for it. All the things that have become impossibly difficult, all the missed lectures and meet-ups, all the exhaustion and lost-ness that is par for the course in depression becomes your fault. And so, how to respond. The first important thing to note here is that this thought, "I'm a stupid idiot" or "I've failed" or whatever is just that – a thought. An idea, a mental event. Thoughts can feel incredibly powerful and important – but they are not equivalent to facts, and you know what? We don't necessarily have to buy into them. Whatever you're blaming yourself for, I'd be willing to bet that your thoughts are presenting a pretty lop-sided picture. One thing that can help when you notice thoughts like this cropping up is to say to yourself, simply, "I'm having the thought that: XYZ". This helps to create distance between you and your thoughts, and with distance comes perspective. Is it really your fault that you've been late handing in your essay three weeks in a row, considering how you've been feeling and the fact that things that seemed easy a year ago feel nigh on impossible now? Is it your fault you've been procrastinating all week again, considering how tortuous and anxiety-ridden work has become? Now of course, this isn't meant to imply you have no responsibility for your actions or can't do anything to change. But I'm inviting you to look for balance, to challenge the default position, the simplistic narrative depression writes. I'm also inviting you to take a kind attitude towards yourself, to lean towards self-compassion. If there are things you regret (and of course there are – you're human), remember that you are a person of many parts; these things don't define you. You are not a stupid idiot.

4. I don't deserve it

"I don't deserve it" is one of a whole bunch of thoughts that squashes your freedom to enjoy nice things. "I mustn't get too big for my boots" is another example, or "I can't enjoy this when I know others are unhappy". In the first podcast I talk about these as "dampening appraisals". Unlike the thoughts I've just been describing which relate to negative experiences, these are about experiences which are, or have the potential to be, enjoyable and meaningful. Finding yourself unable to enjoy positive experiences is often one of the hallmark features of depression, and it's partly these sorts of dampening appraisals that suck out the joy. One way of approaching a thought like this is to try unpacking it. What is the unspoken rule underneath it? That enjoyable experiences must be earned? Or that you must put other people's needs before your own? Or that you have to do something perfectly for it to be worthwhile? CBT therapists talk about "rules for living" which are sort of implicit guiding principles we've learned and lived by over the years. The shoulds and oughts of depressive thinking. Often they reflect values that are quite important to us and which we probably

want to hang onto. The problem comes when they become overly rigid or exacting and look less like a reaching towards something and more like ways of staving off self-judgements or underlying fears. In other words: I must always use my time productively in order to succeed. I must put other people's needs first in order to be liked and valued. You can see how these rules have a protective function, and it's for that reason that they can be pretty hard to change. But change they can. Once you've got them into sharp view, then you're in a position to step back from them and - again - to question. One really useful thing to ask yourself here is: "to what extent is this a helpful rule to live by?" Maybe it worked at school to aim for perfection, to finish all the work you were set and wrap your head around a finite syllabus. But here in Oxford, where the reading lists are impossibly long, where there's always another paper: is this a workable rule? Ask yourself what a more flexible, compassionate rule might look like. Or perhaps try not to think of it as a rule at all, but a value or preference. Not, "I must always excel academically" but, "Work means a lot to me and I like to do well generally, but that doesn't mean perfecting every piece of work or neglecting other parts of myself". Play around with this: try writing things down. Try experimenting with your new rule: challenge yourself to live by it for a day and see what it feels like. You've had plenty of rules to live by in the past – now's your chance to try breaking a few.

5. I'm fundamentally crap

I mentioned earlier the pessimistic thinking that characterises depression. There's a particular sort of mental gymnastics that goes on that I want to focus on here, which is the tendency to leap from the specific to the general. Very often, for people who are depressed, it's not "I've failed this time" but "I am a failure". Instances of disappointment, failure and the like are seen not just as discrete episodes but as a reflection of some ongoing and deeply personal story. In CBT we talk about "core beliefs" – these are essentially our deep, dark fears and they have a global and epically unreasonable quality to them: "I am incompetent". "I am unlovable". The theory is that these negative core beliefs lie lurking and it's when things happen that seem to confirm them – and I'll stress the seem there – that we are at our most vulnerable. When work really isn't going well, and you can't shake off a sense of inadequacy. When your best friend is drifting away and you're convinced you're boring. Core beliefs are often the real sticking points, the thoughts that still feel persuasive even if part of us knows they are unreasonable. How to respond? Firstly by noticing what your mind is up to. Watch out for generalisations. Notice if there are particular themes in your thoughts, messages that keep coming back, or thoughts that seem particularly pernicious and troubling – these can hint at underlying core beliefs. Ask yourself: is there a kinder, more helpful way of looking at things? We're often very good at thinking compassionately about others but terrible at applying this to ourselves. It can help, then, to think what you might say to a close friend or family member who is going through what you are – or what they might say to you. I've mentioned it already but writing things down really does help: it slows thoughts down, helps you get a bit of clarity and distance. Again, this is as much about how you're doing it as what you're doing: it's no good if this descends into self-criticism ("I'm so stupid for even thinking this" and that type of thing). Think of how someone who loves you would be: understanding and really listening to how you feel, and try to cultivate something of this gentleness. Again, this is easier said than done. If you are finding it difficult, that's totally normal – it is the nature of the beast, part and parcel of depression.

6. I'm a burden

This is something I hear a lot from students who come for counselling, and again it is one that can turn out to be pretty problematic as it causes people to retreat from, or even push away, sources of support. Perhaps you worry that you'll drag your friends down, spoil the fun. Perhaps you're conscious of the pressures on their time, their own stresses and worries. Perhaps it's hard to admit to your family that university hasn't been the wonderful, liberating experience it was meant to be. It's worth acknowledging that it may indeed be quite hard to occupy roles you formerly did, to do the things you formerly enjoyed. Depression can also come with irritability, and perhaps there have been times when you've taken out your feelings on others. We all do this; it's often in our closest relationships that our strongest feelings are expressed and our defences rise up. But it's one thing to notice these changes and regrets, and quite another to leap to the conclusion that your very presence is burdensome. This is another of those slippery slopes, another way in which depression writes a simple, self-blaming narrative, ignoring context and nuance and indeed all that is good, all that you mean to the people around you. Now of course it can be risky talking about how you feel; it's not easy, and it doesn't always go well. It can take time to build up sufficient trust in friendships, to find the right words, the right moment. But it can also be risky not talking, bottling up your feelings or finding ways to avoid them. Opening up can be a brave act, and far from burdening others, often it paves the way for a deeper relationship.

I hope this podcast gives you some useful insight into CBT, but to really bring these ideas alive and do the techniques justice you need to try them out in a structured and disciplined way. If you'd like to try this out on your own, you will find excellent self-help resources on the university counselling service website. But remember that self-help can only go so far. If you are struggling, don't hesitate to reach out, either to the university counselling service or to your GP. Depression can have debilitating consequences: if you find yourself withdrawing socially, disengaging from work, struggling to care for yourself or feeling hopeless, it's really important to seek help.

Thanks for listening.