

Fighting back depression and low mood



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Part 1: Understanding Low Mood

We all have periods of feeling down, low, sad or unhappy. This is a **normal** part of everyday life and often there is a reason why we feel like this. We may:

- Have fallen out with a friend,
- Be worried about someone who is ill,
- Have been criticised or bullied,
- Be unable to do something that we enjoy.

Many of these feelings **don't last** very long and will pass overtime.

There are other times when our low mood seems to take over. Our sadness seem to **last**, becomes **very strong** and **interferes** with what we do. When we feel like this:

- It can be hard to **motivate** ourselves to do things.
- We may **stop or give up** doing things, even those things we used to enjoy.
- We may **not want to go out** and prefer to stay at home.
- We may not want to be around people and **spend more time on our own**,
- We may **feel very tired** and lethargic and sit around doing nothing.

Signs and Symptoms

There are a number of **signs** of low mood that you might notice. These include:

- Becoming grumpy, irritable, sensitive or touchy,
- Being tearful and crying for no particular reason,
- Loosing interest in food or comfort eating,
- Difficulty concentrating or completing school work,
- Finding it hard to sleep,
- Difficulty making decisions,
- Loosing interest in life,
- Feeling that life is not worth living,
- Thinking about, or self-harming.

For some people, these feelings of sadness **persist** and last for several weeks. They become very strong and over powering and **interfere with everyday life**. When this happens, people sometimes talk about feeling **depressed**.

Depression

- Around the world depression is the most common mental health problem.
- It tends to develop during adolescence and is more common in girls.
- Rates of depression in children and young people range from 3-8%.
- In the UK, around 80,000 children and young people are estimated to suffer with depression at any one time.

What causes depression?

We don't really know what **causes** depression and often there is no single reason. Some of the possible reasons might be:

- **Genetics:** Although researchers haven't found a depression gene yet it does seem to run in families. Depression is more common in those young people who have a close family member with depression.
- **Trauma:** Experiencing a number of traumatic experiences such as being bullied, abuse, bereavement, family conflict can increase the risk of developing depression.
- **Chemical imbalances:** Researchers have found that some of the chemicals that send messages from our brains don't seem to work as well when people become depressed.
- **Hormones:** Because depression usually develops during adolescence some researchers have wondered whether changes in the body's balance of hormones may be involved.
- **Learned patterns of negative thinking.** People who become depressed become trapped in negative ways of thinking. They learn these patterns over time and often feel hopeless about their future and unable to find solutions to everyday challenges.

There are three main parts of depression:

1. How we think. We end up stuck in negative and critical ways of thinking where we often expect to fail or things to go wrong.

2. How we feel. When we are depressed we will notice a number of symptoms that might affect our concentration, appetite and sleep.

3. What we do: People often feel tired, find it hard to do things and spend more time on their own.

1. How We Think

Children who feel low and depressed are more likely to think **negatively**. They are more likely to:

Blame themselves if things go wrong.

- For example a young person who is struggling to understand some new school work may think “I can’t understand this I must be stupid” rather than perhaps recognising that everyone is finding this work hard.

Generalise problems or difficulties in one area to all parts of their life.

- For example, a young person who did not do very well in a maths test may find themselves thinking “I’m going to fail all my exams” and overlook how well they are doing with their other school work.

Believe that **things can not change** or be different.

- For example, a young person who has had an argument with a friend may find themselves thinking “I will never have any friends, people don’t like me” and not recognise that they do have other friends.

These are the negative and critical ways of thinking that happen when we feel low. So when young people are depressed they are more likely to:

- Think about the **negative things** that happen.
- **Blame themselves** for the things that go wrong.
- Have more **negative expectations** about themselves, what they do and their future.
- **Dwell on the things that go wrong** or aren’t quite right.
- Take one thing that goes wrong and **apply it to all aspects of their life**.

2. How We Feel

As we have already seen, low mood and depression are associated with some changes in how we feel. We might:

Think about or harm ourselves

Be tearful

Have problems sleeping

Find it hard to concentrate

Comfort eat

Go off food

Find it hard to make decisions

Feel tired

Feel irritable

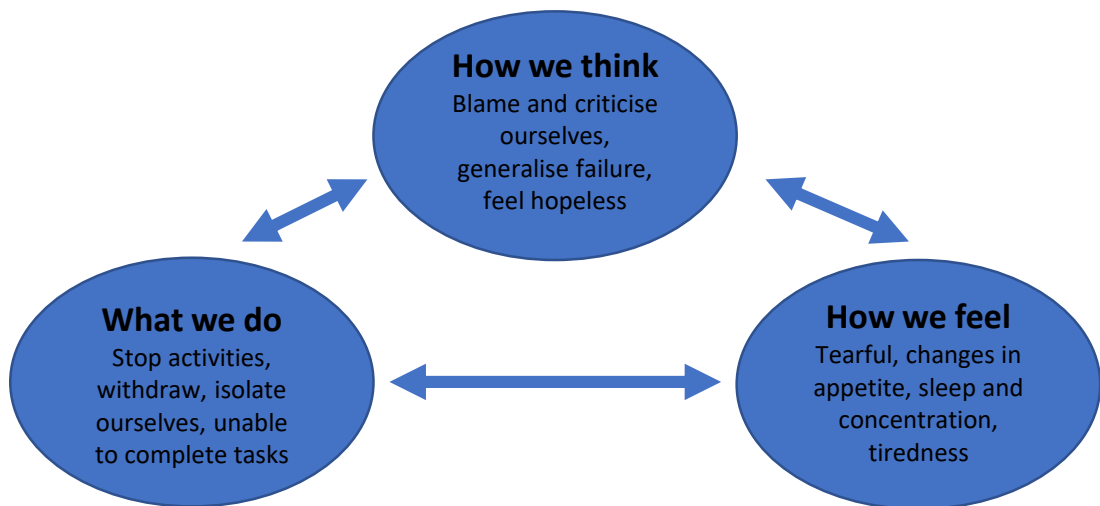


What We Do

Low mood and depression also have a significant impact on what we do. We may

- **Stop doing things**, even those things we used to enjoy.
- We may **not want to be with people** and spend more time on our own.
- We may **stop going out** and spend more time at home.
- Find it **hard to do everyday things** like getting up or dressed.
- Fall **behind with school work**.

Let us put this together



The wider effects of depression

Low mood and depression is difficult for your child but can also have wider effects.

- **School.** Difficulties concentrating, tiredness, and thoughts of failure and hopelessness can effect school attendance and school work. Attendance may suffer and grades may drop.
- **Family relationships.** It can be hard for families to recognise that their child is depressed and is not being a “difficult adolescent”. It is not uncommon for families to have more arguments, particularly around everyday tasks such as getting up, keeping the bedroom tidy and helping around the house.
- **Friendships.** When young people feel down they often feel irritable and find it hard to go out and to socialise with others. Friends may not understand what is happening and relationships may become strained.

Part 2: How Parents Can Help

Low mood and depression is difficult for everyone. Your child doesn't want to feel like this, parents feel frustrated that they can't seem to do anything to help and relationships can become negative and strained. Try to keep communication open and be:

- **Caring** - let your child know that you understand how they are feeling.
- **Supportive** - tell your child that you want to help them.
- **Positive** - be encouraging and let your child know that although it is difficult, they will be able to beat their depression.

What Not To Do

- **Don't get angry**

You may feel frustrated but try and stay calm. Remember your child isn't deliberately trying to wind you up. They are struggling with their mood and need your support.

- **Don't try and force them**

Because depressed children isolate themselves and stop doing things parents often think that they need to take over. Forcing and pushing them to do things usually doesn't help and often results in more arguments.

- **Don't punish them**

Parents may think that their child is being an awkward, moody, uncommunicative teenager and respond to this by setting more rules and taking away privileges. If your child is depressed, this will not help and will make the situation more negative. If they are depressed they will be unable to do things rather than deliberately choosing not to do them.

- **Don't blame yourself**

Parents often feel responsible, guilty or blame themselves for how their child is feeling. Whilst this is understandable, this is not helpful. It makes you feel bad and may make your child feel even worse for having upset you. Rather than blaming yourself focus on what you are doing - encouraging your child to do something to make themselves better.

What can parents do to help?

Tip 1: STOP and let your child know that you have noticed they are not very happy

We maybe aware that someone isn't feeling right but often we don't say anything. We may worry that if we talk about their mood we may make things worse.

This is a myth. You won't make their mood worse by talking. In fact, it is the opposite. By talking you are helping your child to acknowledge how they are feeling.

Reach out and let them know that you have noticed that they seem sad. You could say "I am worried about you and notice that you don't seem very happy at the moment. Has something happened". When talking **avoid "why"** questions like "why are you feeling like this" or "why are you feeling so sad". These questions are difficult since often there is not a single reason or simple answer.

If your child doesn't want to talk, don't push them, but **don't give up**. Acknowledge what they say but be persistent. Let them know that "I hear that you don't want to talk now. That is fine but shall we make a time to talk later".

Alternatively, wait and choose a **time when they seem brighter**. We are often not good at talking about feelings and this can be particularly hard when feeling down. Children may find this conversation easier when feeling slightly better.

Similarly, make the most of any opportunities. You may find yourself with your child after watching a movie or in a car journey together. **Seize the opportunity** and talk with them.

Tip 2: Listen to what they say.

One of the most important things is to give your child space to talk about how they are feeling. This sends a clear message that you care about them and that you want to hear what has happened and how they feel.

Although this sounds easy, **listening is hard**. We have a natural tendency to ask questions, to look for answers and to jump in with solutions and advice. Resist the urge to try and fix things. This will take time.

When you listen it is important to:

- **Avoid being critical or judgemental.** If your child's mood dipped following the breakup of a relationship it won't help by saying "I knew this wouldn't last. I told you they weren't any good for you". They are feeling sad so listen to how they feel.
- **Keep your opinions to yourself.** You may have your own ideas about what your child needs to do but they may not necessarily agree with you. Encourage them to identify possible solutions, respect their opinions and don't impose your ideas on them.
- **Don't lecture them.** This will make them feel criticised. Your child needs your support not a lecture on all the things they have done wrong.

Tip 3: Let them know you **understand how they are feeling**.

Your relationship with your child can be strengthened by connecting with them emotionally. This is called empathy and is the ability to put yourself in your child's shoes and to see and feel the world as they do.

Listen to what they say and **acknowledge how they are feeling**. Try to reflect back what they have said:

- "It sounds as if this has really upset you" or,
- "I can understand why you are feeling so sad".

Take their feelings seriously and **don't dismiss or downplay them**. Comments such as "that was bad but its not the end of the world" are not helpful. They fail to recognise that for your child it does seem like the end of the world.

Also, **don't try to gloss over how they are feeling**. It is painful to listen to how sad your child may be feeling or how they feel hopeless and don't see the point of carrying on. This will make you feel uncomfortable but remember, this is how your child is feeling. Don't try and play this down. Acknowledge how they feel but remain hopeful that together, with help, they will be able to beat their depression.

Tip 4: Help your child **explore what they can do to feel better**.

When people are low in their mood or depressed they often feel overwhelmed. They feel:

- **Helpless** - thinking that things will never change and
- **Hopeless** - thinking there is nothing they can do to help themselves feel better.

Attempting to make any positive change or to try and solve problems feels an impossible task.

Many children are desperate to sort things out for themselves but may be reluctant to acknowledge that they need help, or they may feel guilty that their low mood is having an effect on others, or reject any advice. This requires parents to counter the young persons feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Acknowledge how the young person is feeling whilst remaining **hopeful, positive and encouraging**.

Rather than telling your child what to do **try to be a coach** and help them to identify possible options and solutions. Be patient. Don't immediately dismiss any ideas. If they are unable to come up with any ideas you could suggest some options or alternatively ask what they might suggest to a friend if their friend was feeling like them.

Tip 5: Help your child to make a plan.

Once you have explored options encourage your child to make a plan about the next step. This could be anything such as:

- Monitoring how they feel for the next week
- Letting you know when they are feeling particularly low
- Choosing one goal to work towards, for example getting up each day by 8.30
- Resuming an activity they used to enjoy, for example playing a musical instruments for 10 minutes.

The final part of your plan is to **agree a daily structure and routine**. When children are depressed they find it hard to do things, even everyday activities such as getting up, washing or eating. A daily routine can provide your child with some helpful structure which can reduce the time they spend on their own listening to their negative and critical thoughts.

- Agree a start and end time for the day
- A key task for the morning and afternoon such as some school work or a leisure activity
- Regular family contact, perhaps helping prepare food and eating with the family
- Encourage contact with friends
- Encouraging some light physical activity such as going out for a walk or helping with the shopping

The first steps are always the hardest so it is important that they are **small**. This increases the likelihood that your child will be successful and so begins to challenge their thoughts of hopelessness and helplessness.

Be patient. It may take sometime before your child's mood starts to improve. What is important is that they are now trying to do something to help themselves feel better.

Reinforce and praise what they have attempted to do. Your child may dismiss what they do as unimportant "I used to play my musical instrument all the time so 10 minutes is nothing". Gently remind them that whilst this was true, they actually haven't played it at all for several weeks.

What if my child is self-harming?

Self-harm is quite common amongst adolescents, particularly those who are low in their mood.

- 1 in 4 adolescents will have thoughts of self-harm,
- Half of those who have thoughts of self-harm will go on to harm themselves,
- Of those who do self-harm, half will only harm once.

Self-harm is very distressing for parents. If you discover this, **stay calm and don't panic.**

Why do young people self-harm?

Young people self-harm for a reason **not as a way of seeking attention.** The three most common reasons why young people self-harm are:

- **To relieve tension** – a young person may be unable to deal with their unpleasant emotions and find self-harm as a physical way of relieving their stress.
- **To punish themselves**– a young person may have low self-esteem and feel that they are worthless and should be punished.
- **To show how bad they are feeling** – for some, self-harm is a way of showing how bad they are feeling and use this as a way of reaching out to get help.

What should you do?

- **Stay calm,** and don't blame yourself. Focus on your child and let them know that you want to help.
- If they want to talk with you **make time and listen.** If they don't want to talk with you ask if they will talk with their doctor, someone else they trust or perhaps a helpline (Childline).
- **Acknowledge how they are feeling.** Let them know that you can see how upset and low they are feeling.
- **Explore what has happened.** Your child may feel ashamed, embarrassed or guilty about what they have done and may find it hard to talk or to provide a reason "why". Keep communication open.
- **Work out a plan with your child.** Agree what you will do and how you will work together to keep them safe.

Your **safety plan** could involve:

- Removing whatever they are using to harm themselves,
- Agreeing a way of letting you (or someone else) know when they don't feel safe and are feeling an urge to harm themselves,
- Regularly checking with them to see how they are feeling,
- Spending more time together,
- Finding ways to prevent self-harm such as:
 - Changing their surroundings – move out of their bedroom on their own to be with people,
 - Listening to uplifting music,
 - Trying some relaxation or mindfulness exercises,
 - Clenching an ice cube or splashing very cold water on their face,
 - Writing down what is racing through their mind,
 - Doing something active like a run or dance routine,
 - Punching a pillow.

More help:

You can find out more about self-harm and how to deal with it from:

- <https://www.harmless.nhs.uk/>
- <https://www.psych.ox.ac.uk/files/news/coping-with-self-harm-guide.pdf>

If you are worried about your child you can talk with:

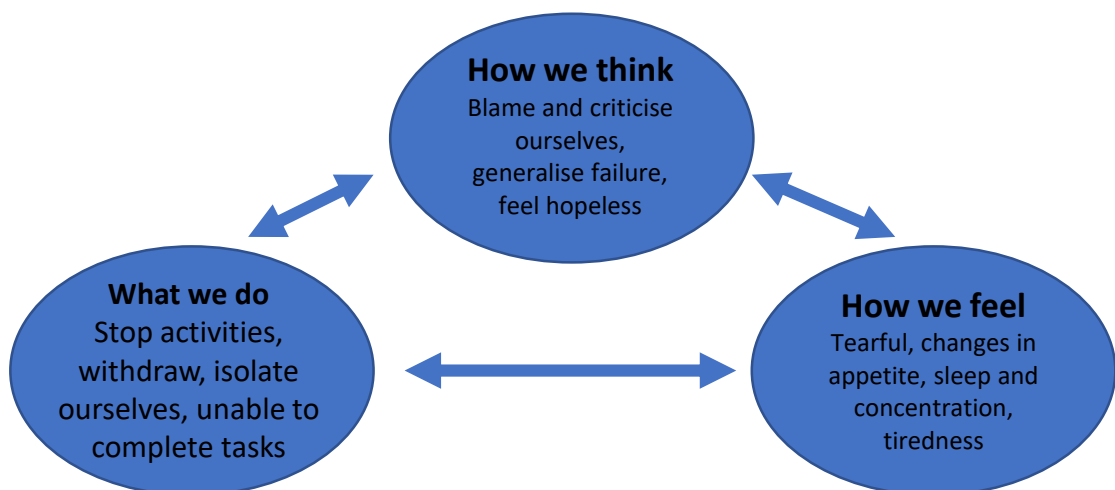
- Your GP,
- Any other professional who might be involved,
- Your local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). You can find the number of your local CAMHS on this website.

Part 3: Fighting Back Depression

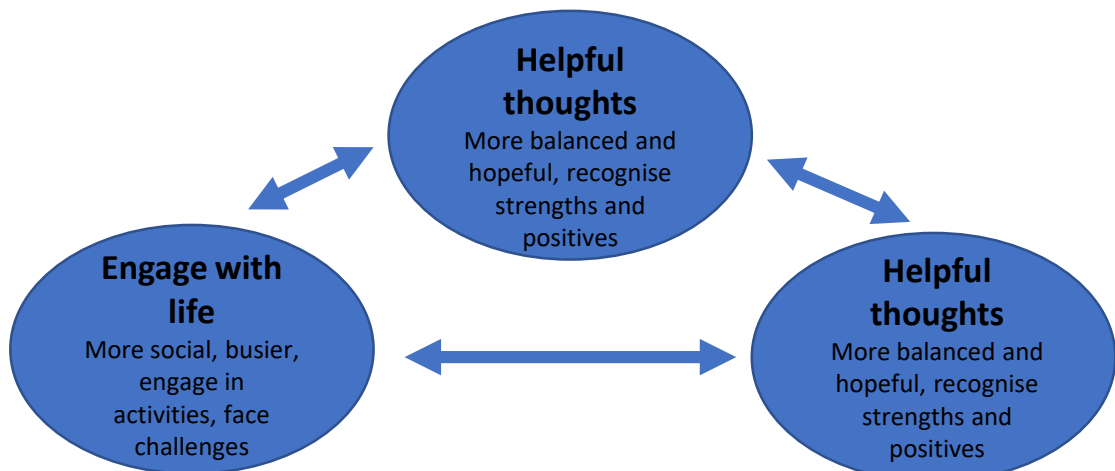
One of the recommended treatments for depression is Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT explores the three parts of depression discussed earlier:

- The way we **think**. It helps us to question the way we think about events and situations.
- How we **feel**. It helps us to understand, manage and tolerate our symptoms of sadness and low mood.
- What we **do**. It helps us to change what we do, to become busier and to engage again with life.

The aim is to move from feeling depressed:



To more balanced thinking which makes us feel better:



The goal is to learn to **cope with low mood** not to get rid of these feelings completely. We all have times of feeling down or low and this is normal.

The aim is to help your child tolerate and manage these feelings so that they **don't interfere with life and stop them from doing what they want to do.**

The Worksheets

Alongside this booklet are some worksheets that can help you and your child learn to fight back depression. These will take you through the following 5 steps:

- Monitor your mood and what you do
- Feel better and manage your emotions
- Get busy
- Identify and challenge the way you think
- Learn to solve problems

Step 1: Monitor Your Mood

When people feel down they stop doing things. They may not go out so much and may spend more time on their own.

A useful first step is to help your child check what they are doing to see if there are any times during the day that they feel worse than others.

A helpful way of doing this is to keep a diary. For each hour encourage your child to write down what they did and how they felt. They can choose a number from 1 (very weak) to 100 (very strong) to rate the strength of their feeling.

A worksheet, "**What You Do – How You Feel**", is included in the accompanying resources.

Encourage your child to complete the diary for 2 or 3 days and then review it with them and look for any patterns.

Day	What were you doing, where, who with	How did you feel	How strong was the feeling?
6-7 pm	Preparing and eating tea with mum	OK	50
7-8 pm	Watching TV with sister	Bit sad	60
8-9 pm	In my bedroom doing homework	Sad	90
9-10 pm	In my bedroom chatting with friends	Sad	90

- Is this what you expected or is your child beginning to feel better?
- When are feelings of sadness strongest e.g. in bedroom when on own
- When are unpleasant feelings weakest, e.g. when busy and helping mum

Change what you do

If there are any times when feelings of sadness are particularly strong it may be possible to explore whether things **could be done differently**.

- If a young person feels worse when they are in their bedroom on her own could the amount of time spent in the bedroom be reduced? Could homework for example be done downstairs?
- If a young person feels particularly sad in the morning when they wake up could they try a different routine? Could they get up straight away instead of lying in bed listening to their sad thoughts or perhaps listen to some music instead?
- If a young person feels particularly sad returning home to an empty house after school is there something else they could do? Could they arrange to meet up with a friend after school, join an after school club or perhaps visit a relative?

Experiment and see if changing things can help to make your child feel better.

Step 2. Feel better and manage your emotions

Constantly feeling sad is horrible. However we tend to accept and live with these unpleasant feelings rather than looking after ourselves and doing something to **make ourselves feel better**.

There are many ways that we can help ourselves so encourage your child to experiment and find out what helps them. Encourage them to develop a toolbox of feel good ideas so that if one doesn't work they can try another.

The "**Feeling Better**" handout provides a number of different ideas. Find out which work for your child. Remember, the more they practice the more these ideas will help.

Step 3. Get busy

When people feel down they often feel tired and stop doing things, even those things they used to like doing. Hobbies, interests, activities or visiting places happen less often. The third step is for your child **to get busy** and to start doing things again.

Help your child to make a list of the things

- They used to enjoy but have now stopped,
- Don't do very often but would like to do more,
- Haven't done but would like to try.

A worksheet, "*Have More Fun*", is included in the resources which accompany this booklet.

Some of the best activities are those that:

- **Involve people.** Activities could be shopping with their sister, meeting a friend in a café or going to the park. These activities help your child reconnect with others.
- **Give a sense of achievement.** Activities that give your child a sense of pride or accomplishment such as fixing their bike, playing an instrument or baking some biscuits.
- **Are important and meaningful.** There is no point simply doing something if it is not important for your child. If your child likes reading or playing a guitar encourage an outing to the local book or music shop rather than a trip to the supermarket.

Once you have helped your child identify some activities **build them into their week**. Ask your child to choose one or two and agree when they will do them. A worksheet, "*Plan More Fun*" is included.

As your child starts to become busier they may find that things don't seem as much fun as they used to be. Don't worry, the fun may take a little longer to return. Keep reminding your child that they are doing well and that being busy gives them less time to listen to their negative thoughts.

Step 4. Identify and challenge the way you think

The fourth step is to help your child find out more about the way they think. We all have negative and critical thoughts at times. This is normal. The problem when people become depressed is that they **think like this all the time**. They never seem to recognise the good things that happen or their successes and they become trapped in these unhelpful ways of thinking

Depressed children are more likely to

- To keep thinking about the things that have **gone wrong** – “if only I hadn’t sent that message”.
- **Blame themselves** for the things that go wrong – “as soon as I arrive people start arguing”.
- **Generalise failure** from one area to all parts of their life - “I did really badly in that exam I’m going to leave school without any qualifications”.
- **Feel hopeless** that things can ever be different - “I will never have any friends”.

Thoughts like these are unhelpful

- They make your child feel **down**.
- They are demotivating and **don’t encourage** your child to try.
- They make your child **give up** and stop doing things.

Balanced thinking

To help your child get out of this way of thinking they need to develop more balanced ways of thinking.

Instead of only looking for evidence that they are a failure and are unsuccessful they need to actively search for the **positive things that happen and when they have been successful**.

Instead of simply listening to the unhelpful thoughts that tumble around their head they need to **check them out** and see if they are seeing the whole picture.

To help your child develop a more balanced approach to life you can encourage them to keep a positive diary. Each day, ask them to identify two or three positive things that have happened. These could be examples of things they:

- Enjoyed,
- Achieved,
- Made them feel good,
- Nice things people said about them.

Because your child is so used to looking for evidence that they are a failure they may find this difficult.

You will need to help them think through their day and help them discover the positives that have happened. It is a nice task to do with your child before they go to bed. As they fall asleep they will be focusing on their achievements rather than their failings. Watching the list grow will help your child to recognise that although things are hard, good things do happen and they can be successful.

A *Positive Diary* is included in the accompanying resources.

Check out the way you think

Because we hear our negative and unhelpful thoughts so often we simply believe them and don't stop to check them out. Encourage your child to check out what they are thinking and to discover whether there may be a more balanced and helpful way of thinking.

This can be done by using the "*Catch it, Check it, Challenge it, Change it*" worksheet in the accompanying resources.

- The first step is to **Catch** the unhelpful thought that is making your child feel depressed.
- The next step is to **Check** out whether your child is making things out to be worse than they really are.
- The third step is to **Challenge** it and to look for any evidence that supports and challenges this way of thinking. Is there something positive and helpful that your child might have overlooked?
- The final step is to **Change** it. On the basis of the above, is there a more balanced and helpful way of thinking about this.

So how does it work?

Catch it: A young person was feeling very low after getting a D grade for their maths assignment and caught the following thoughts. "I never get good marks for my school work. I'm just stupid".

Check it: Is it really the case that they have "never" had any good marks for any of their school work?

Challenge it: "I like history and do alright with drama and art but I am in the bottom classes for maths, English and science".

Change it. "I find academic lessons hard but I am creative and get good marks for drama and art".

This process helps to put things in perspective.

- It acknowledges that they do find some of their school work difficult.
- It **challenges how they think about themselves**. They are not “stupid” but do better at more creative, rather than academic lessons.
- It **stops them generalising** poor marks in maths to all their school work.
- It helps to **identify their strengths** and recognises that they are good at drama and art.

This way of thinking is more balanced and challenges their thoughts of failure.

What would my best friend say?

Another way we can check our thinking is to ask ourselves what someone we respect or value would say if they heard our negative thoughts. Many of our thoughts stay in our heads and we don't say them out aloud or question them.

Use the “*What Would My Best Friend Say*” worksheet in the resource pack. Write down the thoughts and ask your child to imagine what their best friend or someone they value would say if they heard them thinking this way. If they find it hard to imagine what someone else would say, ask them to imagine what they would say to their friend if they heard them thinking this way.

Step 5. Learn to solve problems

When people feel low they often feel overwhelmed by their problems and unable to make decisions. They may put decisions off and hope that their problems will go away. Unfortunately they don't and often ignoring them only makes things worse.

The fifth step to fighting back depression is to learn **how to make decisions and to solve problems**. This involves the following process:

- **Define your problem**. Help your child to be specific and to clearly define what they need to do.
- Now encourage your child to **explore their options**. The aim at this stage is to find as many solutions as possible.
- Once they have some solutions **explore the consequences** of each. Ask your child to think about the short and long term consequences and the consequences for them and for others.
- Now **make a decision**. On balance what is the best option?
- **Put it into practice**. Try it and see what happens.
- Finally check whether they **would they do this again?**

How does it work?

A young person found it difficult to stand up for themselves, worrying that they would be selfish or that others would be angry or criticise them. This made them feel sad, thinking that no one listened to them or was interested in what they had to say. They were also worried that if they spoke up that they would lose their friends. The young person had felt like this for a long time and decided that they needed to do something to make themselves feel better.

The first thing was to **define the problem**. This didn't feel very easy, but after talking the young person defined their problem as: "wanting to feel better around their friends".

Once this was clear they **explored possible options** about how they could do this:

- They could try and say exactly what they wanted and not hold back,
- They could do nothing and just learn to live with it,
- They could make a fresh start and find a new group of friends and then try to be themselves.

They were then helped to work through the **consequences** of each option.

Option	Positives	Negatives
To speak up	I would feel better	Hard to do May upset people
Live with it	None	Continue to feel bad
New group of friends	Can be myself	Hard to do No one around who I really want to hang out with My old friends maybe angry

As with many problems, there was no easy or simple solution. It was clear that continuing with the current situation was the worse option. Changing the friendship group was a big challenge and wasn't really possible.

They **decided that the best option** was to try and speak up although they were worried that they would upset people if they did.

They talked about this and worked out a small way to test this out.

The young person usually walked home with two friends after school. Their friends walked slowly and kept stopping to talk and it took a long time to get home. The young person wanted to get home quicker and decided to see what would happen if they spoke up.

She decided that if they stopped she would say, “Sorry, I need to get home tonight so I will carry on without you”. If the friends put pressure on her to stay, she would stay calm, respect their views but repeat her position. “That’s fine if you guys want to stop here but I do want to get home” and then walk on.

She then took the next step and **tried it**.

The next day as they walked home her friends stopped as usual. This time she was prepared to speak up. Instead of stopping with them she said she wanted to get home. To her surprise her friends heard what she said. They weren’t angry and carried on walking with her.

Afterwards she felt pleased with herself for speaking up. Her friends didn’t get angry or criticise her. Although it is not always easy this showed that there maybe times when she could speak up and was heard. This increased her confidence to **do this again** and she started to speak up in other situations.

A “*Problem Solving*” worksheet is included in the accompanying resources.

Good luck

We hope that these ideas will be helpful and that they give your child some ideas about how they can fight back their low mood

This will be hard work but by working together as a team you will be able to support your child and help them to be successful