Supporting your child with low mood and depression

You can access the online version of this booklet by scanning the QR code below:

Or you can visit the **NHS Lothian Patient Information Online** site and search for '**Supporting your child with low mood and depression**'

https://policyonline.nhslothian.scot/patientinformation/

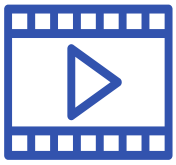
v2.0 Approved by NHS Lothian Patient Information: Nov 26, Review: Apr 29
Developed by Lothian CAMHS TIPS-EIC

Using this workbook

Welcome to **Supporting your child with low mood and depression.**

This workbook is designed to support parents and caregivers in helping their child through periods of low mood. It is intended as a self-help resource and does **not replace professional medical or mental health care**. If you have concerns about your child's health or wellbeing, please seek advice from a qualified healthcare professional.

We know how challenging it can be to know what to do or how to help. Whether this is new for you or something you've been navigating for a while, using this workbook is an important positive step. Inside, you'll find a structured, supportive space to **reflect**, **learn**, and take practical **steps forward**. To help you get the most out of each section, we've also included a **series of short videos** that go alongside the workbook.


Video


Read


Reflect


Activities

Each section of the workbook includes:

- **Video links:** To access the right bitesize video for that topic
- **Key information**: Simple summaries of the main ideas from the videos - so you don't need to remember everything at once.
- **Reflection prompts**: Gentle questions to help you think about your experiences and how you respond in different situations.
- **Practical activities:** Simple tasks and exercises to deepen your understanding and support your child in everyday life.
- **Space to write:** Plenty of room for notes, thoughts, and plans. This is your space to reflect and get organised.

Using this workbook

How to get the most out of it:

Watch the videos first: Each section builds on ideas from the videos, so watching them first can make the information feel clearer and more connected.

Take your time : There's no rush - go at your own pace. Some sections may feel more relevant than others, so spend extra time where it matters most for you and your family.

Be honest and open: Use the reflection prompts to explore your thoughts and feelings honestly. There are no right or wrong answers -this is your space to think things through.

Try the activities: The practical tasks are designed to help you to reflect and apply strategies you've learned. Even small steps can make a big difference.

Revisit when you need to: You might find it helpful to return to certain sections over time. As your child grows and changes, your understanding and strategies might evolve too.

Make it yours: This workbook is a guide, not a rulebook. Write in it, skip to the sections that feel most relevant, and use it alongside support from others.



For life-threatening emergencies, please dial 999.
For all other urgent mental health concerns, please contact NHS 24 on 111 (option 1 for 'mental health) or **call your GP.**
For resources, go to the Getting Help section.

Videos

You can find all the videos here or using the individual links below:

https://services.nhslothian.scot/camhs/video-resources-for-parents-carers/

Video 1: Understanding Depression and Low Mood

Video 2: Depression and Low Mood in Children and Young People

Video 3: The Adolescent Brain and Causes of Depression

Video 4: Supports and Treatments for Depression and Low Mood

Video 5: Supporting Your Child Through Building Relationships

Video 6: Supporting Your Child to Get Back to Basics

Video 7: Supporting your Child to Become More Active + Tackle Negative Thoughts

Video 8: Supporting your Child with Suicidal Thoughts

Video 9: Autistic Young People with Low Mood or Depression

Table of contents

1	**Part 1 – Understanding low mood and depression**	**6**
	What is low mood and depression?	7
	Recognising low mood and depression	11
	Causes of low mood	13
	The vicious cycle of depression	14
	What parents tell us	17
	Looking after yourself	19
2	**Part 2 – Supporting your child with low mood and depression**	**22**
	Supporting your child with low mood and depression	23
	Recovery through relationships	24
	Talking about it	25
	Building an antidepressant team	28
	Back to basics	30
	Changing the cycle of depression	32
	Problem solving	35
	Seeking help	36
3	**Part 3 – Low mood and autism**	**40**
	Autistic burnout vs. depression	41
	What can help?	43
4	**Part 4 – Supporting your child with suicidal thoughts**	**45**
	Talking about suicidal thoughts	47
	Seeking help with suicidal thoughts	50
5	**Resources**	**51**

Part one - Understanding low mood and depression

What is low mood?

What is low mood?

Feeling sad, down, or unhappy is a **normal part of being human**. We all experience these feelings at certain points, and so do children and teenagers. Growing up comes with many challenges: changes in friendships, pressures at school, and figuring out how to fit into the world.

Everyone feels low from time to time.

Think back to when you were a teenager and experienced times when you felt down or unhappy:

- What signs were there that you were feeling that way?
- What helped you to get through these tough moments?



It's normal for young people to have ups and downs - hormones, stress, and growing up can all cause mood swings. But if low mood sticks around for more than a couple of weeks and starts affecting everyday life, your child may need some additional support to feel better. In this workbook we refer to both **depression** and **low mood** to describe the experience you child may be having and **aim to help you notice and respond to how your child may be feeling.**



Some parents may find themselves quickly jumping to self-blame when their child experiences low mood. But depression develops through a mix of biological, psychological, and social factors - not because of any single action by a parent.



See more about this in Video 1 and Video 2

What is depression?

When we talk about depression, we don't just mean feeling sad or moody. Depression is a **mental health condition** that causes **persistent changes** in:

- **Mood**
- **Thinking**
- **Activity/day-to-day behaviour.**

Depression has a **noticeable impact on daily life,** making it harder to manage responsibilities, stay connected with others and enjoy activities.

Thinking

- **Self-critical thoughts** (e.g., "I'm stupid," "I'm worthless")
- **Negative** or **hopeless** thoughts about the future
- **Thinking** or fantasising about **death or dying**
- Struggling to **concentrate.**

Mood

- **Sad**, down, tearful
- Grumpy, **irritable**, angry
- **Flat**, numb - 'Going through the motions' without enjoying things
- **Hopeless**, stuck, fed up
- **Overwhelmed** – even with small tasks or decisions
- Drained, tired, **no energy.**

Activity

- **Change in habits:** sleep or eat more/less, neglect hygiene
- **Lose interest** in activities
- **Doing nothing** for long periods
- Struggling to keep up with **daily routines/simple tasks.**

Relationships

- **Pulling away** from friends and family.
- More **arguments or conflict**.
- Spending lots of **time alone**
- **Cancelling plans.**

See more about this in Video 1

[2, 3, 4].

The adolescent brain

This section will help you understand **how the adolescent brain develops** and why teens often experience mood swings and intense emotions.

Different parts of our brain develop at different times in our lifespan:

The *emotional* brain, known as the **limbic system**, is responsible for **feelings, instincts, and impulses**. This part of the brain develops earlier in life and is especially active during adolescence. It's what helps us respond quickly to emotional situations, but it doesn't always help us think things through.





The *logical brain*, called the **prefrontal cortex,** oversees things like **decision-making, problem-solving, and controlling emotions and impulses**. This part of the brain continues to develop well into a person's twenties. For children and teenagers, it's still a work in progress. This means they may find it harder to **manage strong emotions, pause before reacting, or make sense of how they're feeling.**

Understanding how the adolescent brain develops, helps explain why teens often feel emotions so intensely. This can lead to impulsive decisions, mood swings, and strong reactions that aren't always helpful. Their emotional brain is in overdrive, while the part responsible for logic and reasoning is still catching up.

Remember, this isn't about your child being difficult - it's about **their brain learning to manage complex emotions**. You can help by staying calm, offering reassurance, and supporting them as they build coping skills over time.

See more about this in Video 3

Recognising depression and low mood

As a parent or caregiver, you are not expected to diagnose or label your child. Instead, this workbook invites you to **notice** how the symptoms and experience of low mood/depression might be showing up in your child's life and think about how you can **respond** with care and support.

Just by reading this, you're already taking a helpful step. Your observations, instincts, and openness to learning really matter

Depression looks different for each young person

Here's how it shows up for Robyn and Lewis:

Symptom	Robyn	Lewis
Feeling sad, flat, or numb	✓	✓
Feeling worthless	✓	
Fatigue/low energy		✓
Loss of pleasure	✓	✓
Irritable	✓	
Suicidal thoughts		✓
Loss of motivation	✓	

This workbook uses the terms low mood and depression, but what matters most is **using words your child understands**. Everyone experiences things differently, so **choose language that feels right for them.**

See more about this in Video 2

Young people's experiences

It's a bit like walking down a long, dark corridor, never knowing when the light will go on.

Neil Lennon

I find myself brooding on the past a lot of the time.

Every day is the same – grey.

I've no energy, drive or motivation. It's not like me.

Life is too much for me.

I can get so angry it scares me.

I hate myself. I feel I deserve to be like this.

I cry a lot – it can happen anywhere.



Depression is a prevalent issue among teenagers, with up to 25% of young people experiencing a period of depression by the age of 19 [1].

See more about this in Video 2

Recognising depression and low mood in your child/young person

Remember: Depression and low mood can look very different from one young person to another.

What changes or signs of depression/low mood have you noticed in your child?

Thoughts

Feelings

Actions

Relationships

Anything else

Causes of low mood

While it can help to understand what might have caused your child's low mood or depression, it isn't always clear or essential. Causes might be **complex** and **interconnected.**

Depression is nobody's fault. This section isn't about finding one cause or placing blame - it's about building awareness. Understanding what might be affecting your child can help you respond with empathy and find the right support.

Environmental

- Stressful life events
- Grief and loss
- Transitions

Interpersonal

- Conflict
- Friendship issues
- Bullying

Individual

- Thinking patterns
- Sense of self
- Sense of failure

Biological

- Genetic predisposition
- Hormones
- Brain chemistry

The key to feeling better is not in understanding what caused the depression/low mood, but what keeps it going.

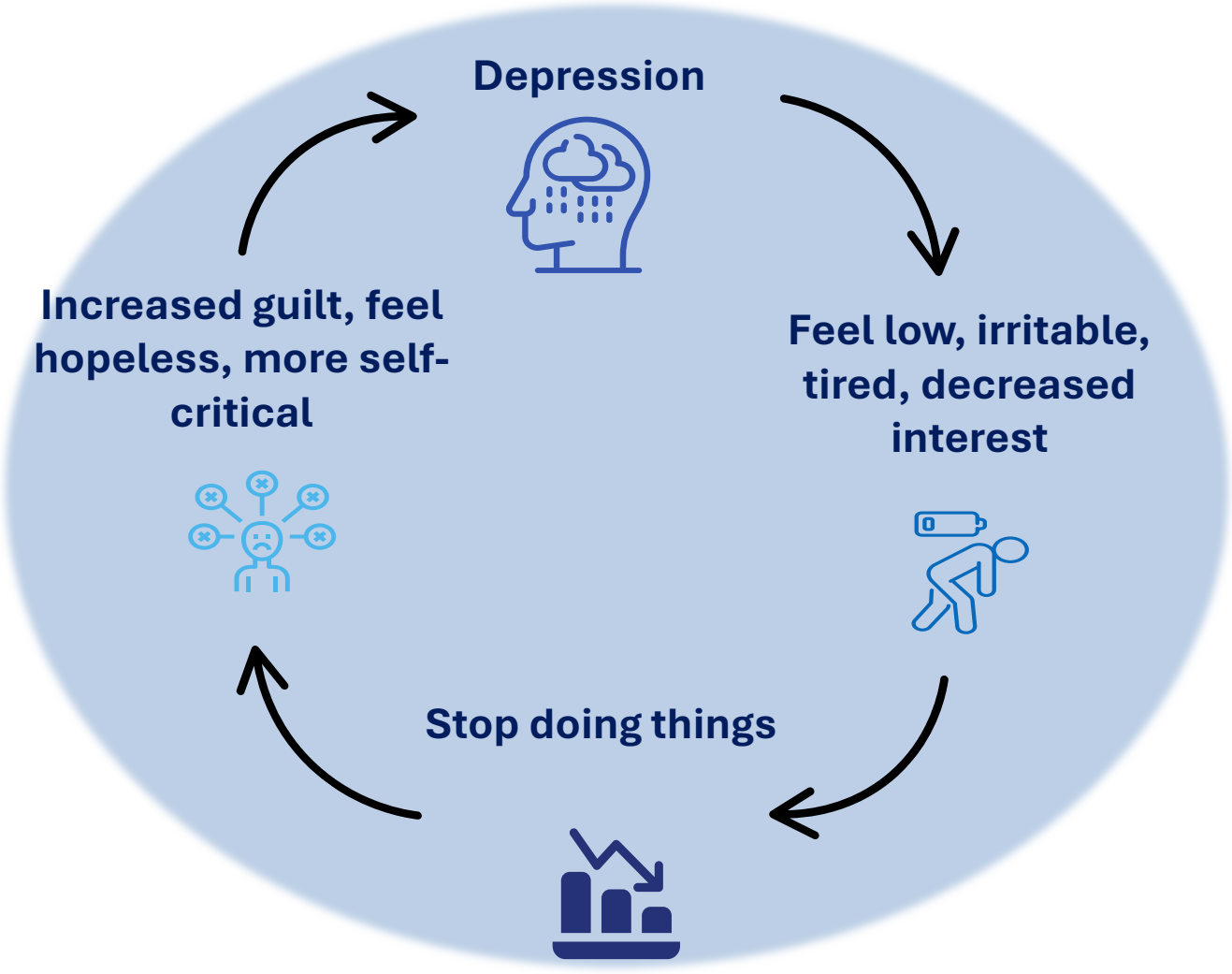
See more about this in Video 3

The vicious cycle of depression

Depression can lead to big changes in a young person's routines and behaviours. These changes often make the depression worse and get in the way of recovery.

When a young person feels low, irritable and tired, they may start doing less - avoiding schoolwork, staying home, or pulling away from others. Doing less means missing out on positive experiences and everyday tasks, which can lead to guilt and hopelessness. Their motivation then drops even more, and they become even less active. Over time, this pattern can trap them in what's known as the vicious cycle of depression.

It often looks like this:



See more about this in Video 4

Unhelpful thinking styles

When a young person is depressed, their thoughts often become more negative and self-critical. **These unhelpful thinking styles** can happen automatically, without them noticing, and over time can make them feel worse and keep the cycle of depression going.

Here are some common unhelpful thinking styles. Have a look at the examples and tick the ones you notice in your child:



Negative glasses - Only seeing the negative ☐



Discounting the positive - Anything positive is dismissed ☐



Fortune-telling - Predicting failure and negative outcomes ☐



Mind reading - Predicting what other people are thinking e.g. 'They don't like me' ☐



Dustbin labels - 'I'm rubbish' or 'It's me, I'm hopeless' ☐



Overgeneralising - A single event or upset snowballs into overall defeat - 'I just can't do anything' ☐



Catastrophising - Blowing something out of proportion ☐



All or nothing thinking - Seeing things in only two categories - 'If I don't get an A I'm a failure' ☐



Should and must – Setting impossible targets or standards ☐

See more about this in Video 1 and Video 4

Understanding low mood and depression - space to reflect

If you'd like, take a pause and use this space to jot down any thoughts or reflections on what you've learned so far about your child's experiences with low mood or depression.

What parents tell us

Worrying about your child can feel exhausting and lonely.

When a child or teen is experiencing depression, they may struggle at school, even when they're trying hard. Friendships can become difficult, and they might stop joining activities that they used to enjoy. Young people can then feel left out, overwhelmed and low. Talking about feelings can also be really hard for them.

Watching this happen can be painful. **Many parents feel unsure how to help and may start to feel overwhelmed or discouraged**. Sometimes, conflicts and arguments arise at home, making things even harder for everyone.

How it can feel for parents:



See more about this in Video 2

How it can feel for parents

Take a moment to reflect on how you are feeling and the impact your child's depression has on you as a parent.

Write down any thoughts below:

Looking after yourself

Supporting a child with depression can be draining. It's natural to put your child's needs first, but over time this can take a toll, and **sometimes you need to pause and care for yourself too.**



Remember: Just like on an airplane, you need to put on your own oxygen mask first. Looking after yourself isn't selfish - it's essential, because when you care for your own wellbeing, you're better able to support your child.

Small acts of self-care - like chatting with a friend, taking a break, or doing something enjoyable - can make a big difference. If things start to feel overwhelming, reaching out for support can help: your GP, a parent support group, or a helpline can help.

You're doing your best, and you deserve care too.

Physical

- Diet
- Physical activity
- Preventative medical care
- Sleep hygiene
- Getting outdoors

Emotional

- Expressing your emotions
- Relaxing activities
- Saying no to extra responsibilities
- Self-compassion

Social

- Spending time with loved ones
- Setting healthy boundaries
- Communication
- Asking for help

Spiritual

- Self-reflection
- Meaningful activity
- Connecting with your values
- Sacred spaces

See more about this in Video 5

Parent wellbeing plan

Things I can do every day to support my own wellbeing

Things I can do weekly to support my own wellbeing

Things I can do every now and then to support my own wellbeing

More ideas on parental self-care:

https://www.annafreud.org/resources/family-wellbeing/self-care-for-parents-and-carers/

Sample parent wellbeing plan

Things I can do every day to support my own wellbeing

- 5 minute grounding exercise every morning
- Get outside every day
- Check in with a friend or loved one
- Gratitude journal

Things I can do weekly to support my own wellbeing

- Plan a catch-up with my sister
- Make time to do something creative - drawing/painting
- Reflect on the week -what helped + was hard
- Attend my own counselling session

Things I can do every now and then to support my own wellbeing

- Book an afternoon off just for me
- Go somewhere new with the whole family
- Ask my friend to help me sort through clutter
- Revisit wellbeing goal and update my plan

Part Two - Supporting your child with low mood and depression

Supporting your child with low mood and depression

Supporting a child or teen with depression can feel overwhelming and many parents worry about what to do next - that's completely understandable.

This section offers **practical ideas** to help you support your child. Every child is different, so there's no single solution. Think of this as a **toolbox:** explore the options, try things out, and adapt what works best for your family.

Recovery through relationships - Positive connections with others are key to feeling better.

Talking about it - Exploring how your child feels can help you support them and encourage coping strategies.

Focusing on the basics - Daily routines like sleep, food, and exercise play a big role in recovery.

Behavioural activation - Encouraging small steps towards increasing activity can help break the cycle of low mood.

Collaborative problem solving - Working together to tackle challenges using simple, practical strategies can make a big difference.

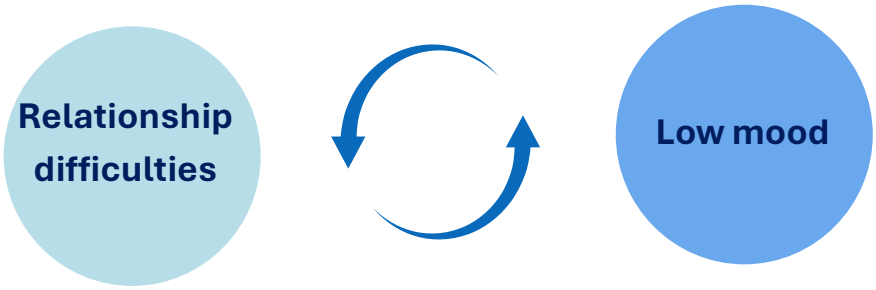
Seeking help – Knowing when and where to get help is important.

In this section you might come across ideas you're already using which is great! You may also discover new strategies you haven't tried yet.

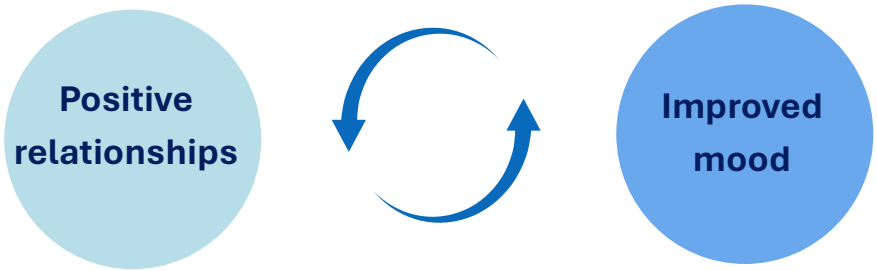
Remember: No one gets it right all the time. We're human, we make mistakes, and we're always learning. Use this section as an opportunity to stay open-minded and explore what might work for you and your child.

Recovery through relationships

Our relationships with others have a big impact on how we feel. Problems like conflict, bullying, or feeling left out can make low mood worse. When someone feels down, they often withdraw, feel tired, or lose motivation to socialise. This can create a vicious cycle - less connection leads to feeling even lower. Irritability can also cause arguments or fallouts, which deepen the cycle.



The good news: the cycle can work the other way too. Supportive relationships and positive social experiences can boost recovery. Feeling understood and supported helps ease isolation and sadness. Small steps – spending time together, reducing conflict or simply being available – can make a big difference. These moments start a positive cycle: mood improves and as it does, young people often feel more motivated to spend time with friends and family, supporting wellbeing.



You know your child best, so you may already have ideas for nurturing your relationship. For some young people, it's about **feeling heard**; for others, **regular check-ins** or **space to talk** when ready helps.

One of the most powerful things you can do is simply **be present**. Even if your child says little, knowing you're there can be deeply reassuring. **Never underestimate the impact of just being there.**

See more about this in Video 5

Talking about it

Talking with your child about how they're feeling - and how you can support them - is one of the most helpful things you can do. **They might not feel ready to talk right away, and that's okay**. Just giving them regular chances to chat is a great start.

Take a look at the **tips** below and think about how you can approach these conversations in a way that works for your child.



Be a good listener
Try to listen with an open mind, no matter what your child shares - even if it's hard to hear or doesn't make sense right away.

You might say: *"I'm here to listen, and I really want to understand what you're going through"*
"Can I check I have understood that right?"



Let the child lead
Give your child space to guide the conversation. Asking too many questions can feel overwhelming, especially if they're already finding things difficult.

You might say: *"You don't have to explain everything right now - just share what you feel ready to."*



Listen first, problem solve later

Start by listening – really listening – before jumping into solutions. It's natural to want to fix things, but often your child simply needs to feel heard.

You might say: *"I'm not going to jump in with solutions - I just want to understand how you're feeling."*



Problem-solve together

When it's time to look for solutions, make it a team effort. Offer support without taking over.

You might say: *"Would it help if we thought this through together?" or "I have a few ideas, but I'd love to hear yours first."*



Pick the right moment

Think about when and how to have these conversations. Some young people find it easier to talk while doing something else - like walking, driving, or drawing. Be creative in how you connect.

If talking feels too hard, suggest alternatives like texting, writing, or using drawings and images to express feelings.

Additional video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw

Talking about it

DOs ✓

- Offer regular, consistent support
- Be ready to listen
- Listen actively and attentively
- Acknowledge and validate their feelings
- Take what they say seriously.

DONTs ✗

- Ask lots of questions
- Assume you know what they're thinking
- Push them to talk if they're not ready.

Activity: Plan a supportive conversation

Take a moment to think about how you'd like to approach a conversation with your child. Use the prompts below to help you plan a safe, caring space for both of you.

1. When does my child seem most open to talking? *(e.g. in the car, before bed, while doing something together)*

.....

.....

2. What helps me stay calm and present when listening? *(e.g. taking a breath, reminding myself not to fix things right away)*

.....

.....

3. What could I say to show I'm listening and not judging? *(e.g. "I'm really glad you told me." or "I'm here to listen, not to fix things.")*

.....

.....

4. How can I support you without taking over? *(e.g. "Would it help if we thought through this together?")*

.....

.....

Please go to Part 4 for guidance on speaking to your child about suicidal thoughts.

Build an “anti-depressant” team

One helpful activity is creating an “anti-depressant team” with your child.

This is simply a way to show them they’re not alone and that support can come from lots of people in their life. Different people can offer different kinds of “anti-depressant” activities -things that help lift your child’s mood.

It doesn’t mean having deep or serious chats with everyone. Sometimes support is doing something fun together, hanging out, or helping with everyday tasks. All of these roles matter.



Explore with your child who they’d like support from, and what role each person could play. This helps build a shared plan as a team.

Who can help?	What can they do?	How would this help?
Mum	-Go through my journal with me once a week	-Give me the chance to talk about what’s going on
Dad	-Drive me to netball - Take me on a dog walk after school	-Encourage me to be active and see friends - Suggest to get outside so we have time to talk 1:1
Sister	-Do drawing with me before bed	-Encourage me to do some art/crafts again - Encourage me to include a relaxing activity in my bedtime routine

While talking about mood is important, spending time together where depression isn’t the focus is just as valuable.

See more about this in Video 5

Plan an “anti-depressant” team with your child

Who can help?	What can they do?	How would this help?

Adapted from Law (2016) [7]

See more about this in Video 5

Back to basics

It's easy to overlook **the basics** when supporting your child's mental health. Poor sleep and eating habits can lead to tiredness, irritability, and trouble concentrating, which can affect friendships and school and feed the cycle of low mood.

Improving sleep, **diet**, **movement**, and **routine** won't cure depression, but they can help your child feel better equipped to cope – like wearing a bike helmet, you might not notice the impact every day, but they provide a buffer when life gets tough.

Sleep	Diet	Physical Activity
Bedtime routine	Regular meals/snacks	Enjoyable activity
Sleep routine	Balanced diet	Gentle exercise
Limiting sugar/stimulants	Family mealtimes	Walking
Limiting screens.	Enough water.	Dancing to favourite song.







These ideas might sound simple but are not always easy to put into practice - especially when your child is feeling low.

Take it one step at a time. Start with what feels manageable, and focus on **small, steady changes** rather than fixing everything overnight.

See more about this in Video 6

Activity: Back to basics

Activity: Goals

Take a moment to think about how you can support you child in getting back to basics. To make change doable and set you both up for success, choose no more than **three small, realistic goals**.

Examples: Have dinner together, go for a short walk, limit screen time before bed,
Get up/go to be the same time every night.

1 .....

2 .....

3 .....

Remember:

Expectations	When your child is feeling low, they won't be able to manage the same things they usually can - and that's okay.
Hope	Keep a hopeful outlook - things can get better.
Compassion	Show understanding that what you're asking may be difficult.
Listen	Hear what your child has to say about routines.
Small Steps	Change is hard - small steps make it more manageable.

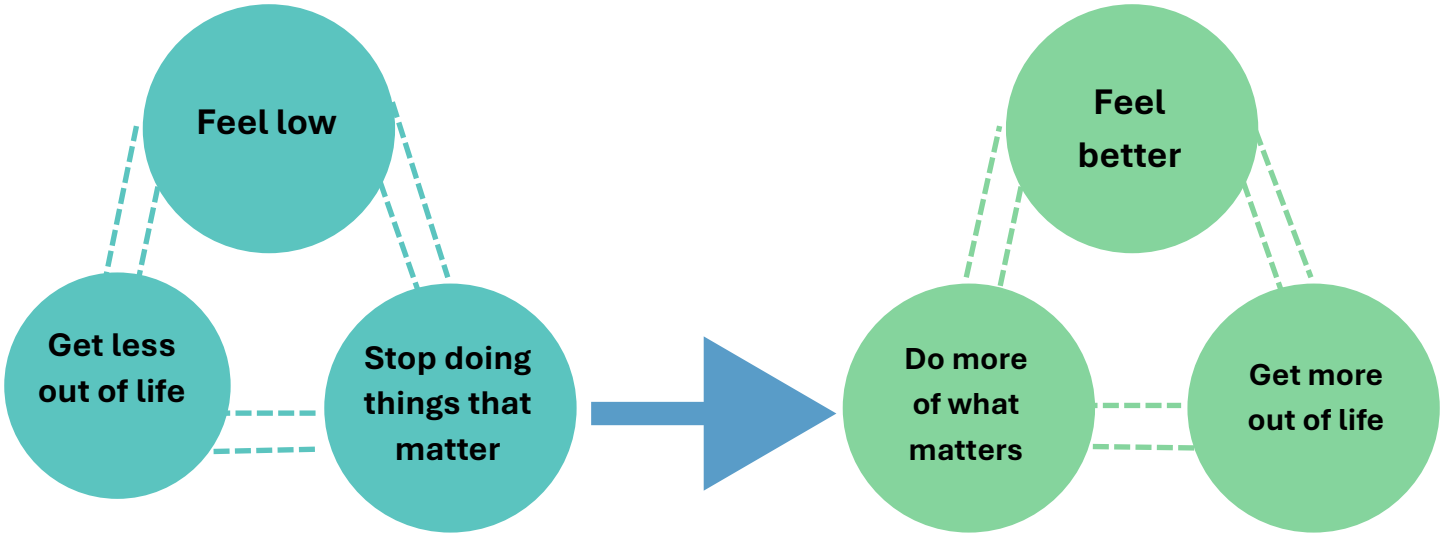
See more about this in Video 6

Changing the cycle of depression

In part one of this workbook, we introduced the vicious cycle of depression. You learned that depression can cause big **changes in a young person's routines and behaviours.** When someone feels low, they often stop doing things they enjoy or value. Many young people feel they should wait until they feel better before doing more - but this actually keeps the cycle going and can make them feel worse.

Behavioural Activation helps to break this cycle. The idea is simple: doing more of the things that matter can help people feel better. When they start doing activities that are important to them, life feels more rewarding, and their mood begins to lift. Feeling a little better makes it easier to do even more of what matters and that's how a **positive cycle begins.**

Remember: It's not just about encouraging your child to do more activities. It's about helping them find a balance of activities that feel meaningful and important to them.



Adapted from Pass and Reynolds (2014) [5]

It may sound simple, but it can be a real challenge. Young people often want to wait until they feel better but it's the activity itself that helps lift their mood. They'll need support to get started and stick with it.

See more about this in Video 4 + Video 7

Making an activity log

A great first step in helping your child do more meaningful activities is to create an **Activity Log** together. This will show **how they spend their time** and help you **spot patterns** in how their activities affect their mood.

You can then start planning **activities that are important to them.** Think about things that give them a sense of enjoyment, achievement or closeness with others.

Here's an example of an activity log:

	MORNING	AFTERNOON	EVENING
MON	Walk to school	Meet Sister for cake after school	Go to bed early
TUE	Read news article with breakfast	Talk about article with friends	Help to cook tea
WED	Walk to school	Organise weekend plans with friends	Do some drawing before bed
THU	Get up early and tidy room	Sit with someone new at lunch	Facetime friends
FRI	Walk to school	Walk dog with Mum	Movie night
SAT	Get out of bed by 9am	Go to book event at library	Go to friend's sleepover
SUN	Eat full breakfast with Mum	Practice piano	Hair mask

Making an activity log

Joint Activity: Your activity log can look any way you like. Get creative and make it work for your child. This is a chance to do something together - explore activities that matter to them and think about how these might support your child's wellbeing. **No activity is too small!**

	Morning	Afternoon	Evening
MON			
TUE			
WED			
THU			
FRI			
SAT			
SUN			



See more about this in Video 7

Problem solving

Life can feel overwhelming for a young person with depression - especially when everyday challenges pile up. One practical way to help is by using problem solving together.

Problem solving **means breaking a challenge into smaller steps,** so they feel less stressful and more manageable. It helps your child feel more in control and confident about handling difficulties.

When making changes, obstacles can pop up and get in the way. Problem solving is a useful tool for troubleshooting and finding ways forward.



Step 1: Identify the problem
What's the issue? Be specific and include details.



Step 2: Identify solutions
List as many possible ideas as you can. Let your child lead and add suggestions too.



Step 3: Check pros and cons
Think about how each option might help and if it's realistic.



Step 4: Rate the options
Use numbers, stars, emojis to show how good each solution is.



Step 5: Choose a solution
Pick the highest-rated option. If it's safe, let your child try – even if it's not your first choice.



Step 6: Make a plan
Decide where, when, how and who can help.

Step 7: Try it out!



Step 8: Review together
What worked? If it didn't, think about what to change or try next.

See more about this in Video 7

Seeking help

Supporting a teenager who experiences low mood can feel overwhelming, but **you don't have to do it alone**. This workbook and the accompanying videos offer practical tools and ideas, but there may be times when extra support is needed.

When to seek further help

Reach out for professional support if you notice any of these signs:

- Low mood that lasts **more than a few weeks**
- Big or worrying changes in **sleep or appetite**
- Trouble **concentrating** or a drop in school performance
- Talking about feeling **hopeless** or **worthlessness**
- **Self-harm** or saying they want to hurt themselves
- **Suicidal thoughts**
- Using substances or taking **risky behaviours**
- **You feel unsure** or **out of your depth.**

Trust your instincts. If something doesn't feel right, it's okay to ask for help.



Take care of yourself too

It's easy to put all your energy into supporting your child, but your wellbeing matters just as much.

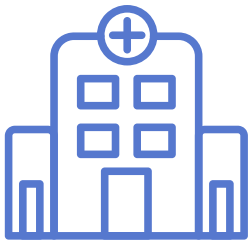
- *Check your Parental Wellbeing Plan*
- *Explore extra supports for parents in the Resources section*

Seeking help

Where to find professional support:



GP (General Practitioner): Your first point of contact. GPs assess the situation and can refer your child to CAMHS if needed.



CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services): NHS services for young people with moderate to severe mental health difficulties.



School Counsellors or Pastoral Teams: Many schools offer support or can connect you with external services.



Private Therapists: If considering private support, choose therapists registered with bodies like BACP, COSCA, HCPC, or UKCP.



Community support: Local or national organisations may offer help *(see the Resources section in the workbook)*.



For life-threatening emergencies, please dial 999.
For all other urgent mental health concerns, please contact NHS 24 on 111 (option 1 for 'mental health) or **call your GP.**
For resources, go to the Getting Help section.

Supporting your child with low mood and depression - space to reflect

Take a pause if you wish and use this space to note any reflections on how you may want to support your child.

Part Three - Low mood and autism

Low mood and autism

Autistic young people can experience depression just like their non-autistic peers, but it may **look different** and can be **harder to recognise.**

Autistic young people may show typical signs of depression, but they may also show signs that are more specific to autism:

- Increased repetitive, ritualized or stimming behaviours
- Loss of interest in special interests or sudden changes in focus
- Fixation on death or dying
- More frequent emotional outbursts or meltdowns
- Reduced physical movement or signs of shutdown.

Depression can be harder to spot in autistic young people because because its signs look like, or get dismissed as, part of their autism.

1. Social withdrawal vs. depression
Autistic young people often need more alone time. This can look similar to the social withdrawal seen in depression making it easy to miss as a sign of low mood.

2. Emotional expression
Autistic young people may show emotions differently (flat affect, less facial expressions, or strong reactions to small changes). This can mask low mood.

3. Masking feelings
Some autistic young people actively hide their feelings to fit in or avoid judgment which can make depression less visible.

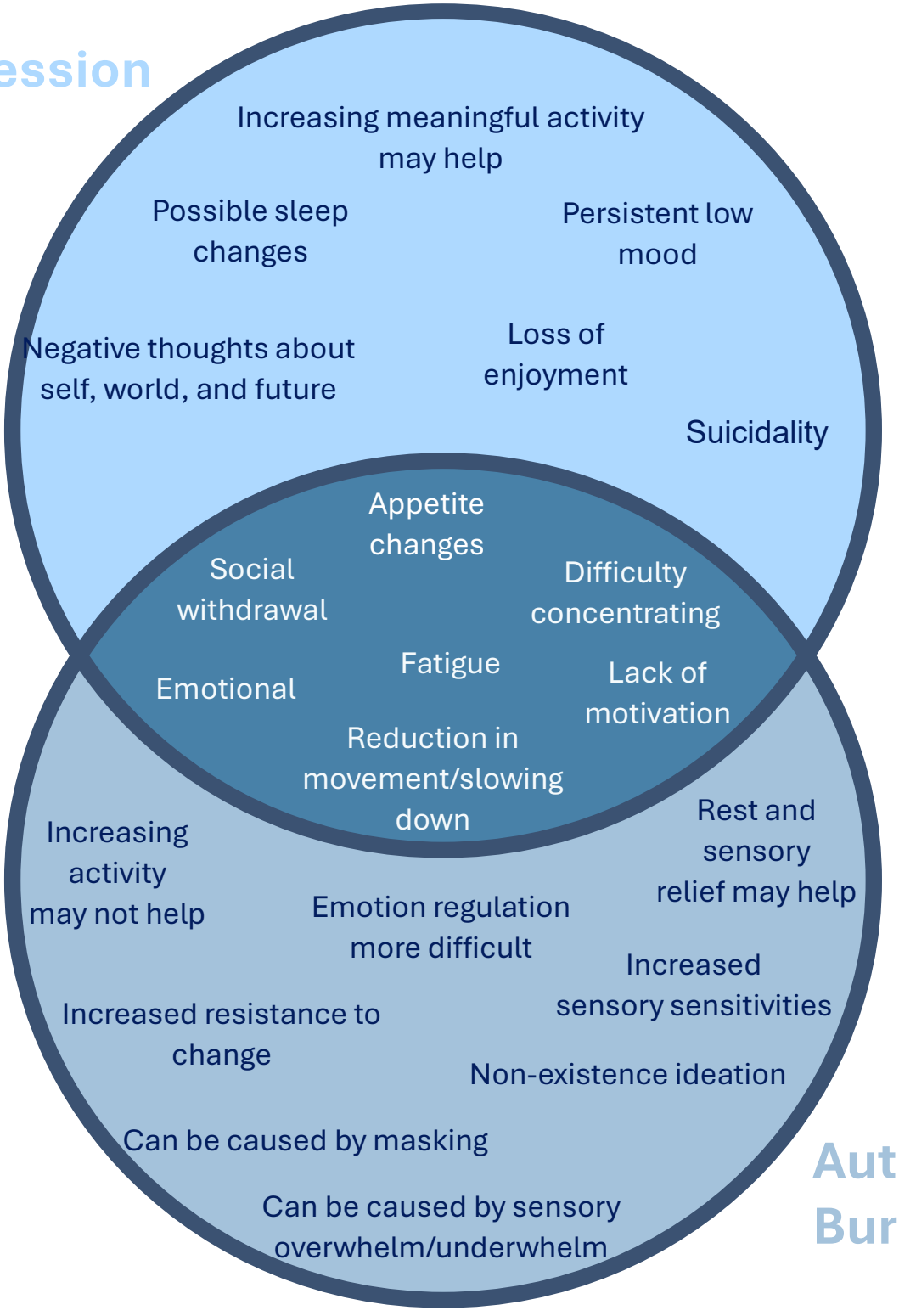
4. Communication differences
Autistic young people may not have the words to describe how they feel or even notice it. Instead, you may see irritability, shutdowns, meltdowns.

5. Autistic burnout
Burnout from effort to cope with sensory overload, social demands and masking can look like depression - fatigue, loss of interest, withdrawal - but has different causes.

See more about this in Video 9

Autistic burnout vs depression

Autistic burnout and depression can seem similar, but they are not the same. Each has different causes and needs. Understanding the difference helps you give your child the right support.



Remember, it's possible for a young person to experience both autistic burnout and depression at the same time.

Spotting the signs

Reflective Activity 

Take a few minutes to think about your child's recent behaviour. Have you noticed any changes from what's typical for them?

For example:

- Less interest or enjoyment in their favourite activities or special interests
- Shifts in energy, mood, or daily routines
- Changes in sleeping or eating habits
- More frequent or different repetitive behaviours (like stimming)

Write down your thoughts below:

What can help?



Reconnecting with interests and hobbies: Encourage your child to spend time on activities they enjoy. Even small steps can lift mood and motivation.



Support at school: Work with school staff to adjust the environment, workload, or schedule to reduce stress and support wellbeing.



Extra academic help: If schoolwork feels overwhelming, extra supports like mentoring or tutoring can ease pressure and build confidence.



Healthy routines: Help your child keep regular sleep, meal, and movement. Predictable routines can regulate mood and energy.



Talking therapies: Approaches like adapted CBT or counselling can help, especially when tailored to your child's communication style and sensory needs.



Medication: Sometimes, medication is considered in addition to other supports. Discuss options with a healthcare professional.



Create a safe space: A calm, sensory-friendly environment can reduce overwhelm and support emotional regulation.



Encourage small, achievable steps: Simple goals like making a cup of tea or getting dressed can build momentum and a sense of control.

Find a "safe person": Help your child identify someone they trust - this could be you, a teacher, or a peer, who they can turn to when things feel hard.

Low mood and autism – Space to reflect

Feel free to pause here and jot down any reflections about supporting your autistic child with low mood or depression.

Part Four -

Supporting your child with suicidal Thoughts

Supporting your child with suicidal thoughts

This section of the workbook will help you:

- Learn what suicidal thoughts are.
- Learn practical ways to talk to your child about suicidal thoughts.
- Find resources and services that can support both you and your child.

Depression can increase the risk of suicidal thoughts, but not every child or young person who feels low or depressed will think about suicide.



The information and suggestions in this section are here to support you, but they are not a substitute for professional care. **If you are worried about your child's safety or wellbeing, please reach out to qualified mental health professional.**

What are suicidal thoughts?

Suicidal thoughts – sometimes called suicidal ideation - mean thinking about ending one's life. These thoughts can range from brief, passive thoughts like 'I wish I could disappear' to persistent thoughts with intent and planning. **Not everyone who has these thoughts will act on them, but all suicidal ideation should be taken seriously.**

It's completely understandable to feel distressed if you learn your child has suicidal thoughts. You might also feel frustrated or confused as you try to make sense of what's happening. **Remember, knowing your child is struggling gives you an opportunity to support them and help them feel less alone.**



See more about this in Video 8

Talking about suicidal thoughts

Talking to your child about suicidal thoughts can feel daunting - but starting the conversation is the most important step.

As a parent, you might worry that talking about suicide could make things worse, but research shows the opposite. **Open conversations can help your child feel understood and less alone.**

Young Minds: A Parent's Guide
Provides information and guidance to help parents cope with a young person who is struggling with thoughts of suicide.

Practical tips for talking about suicidal thoughts:

1. Stay calm

Try to approach your child with **calmness** and **compassion**. This matters because they may be watching how you respond to decide how much to share. Let them know you've noticed they're struggling and that you care. Avoid reacting with anger, panic, or judgement.

If they are not ready to talk face-to-face, that's okay. Reassure them you are there to listen and help. Some young people find it easier to open up through text or messages.

You might say: *"I've noticed you've been spending a lot of time alone lately, and I'm worried about you. I'm here if you want to talk."*

For life-threatening emergencies, please dial 999.
For all other urgent concerns contact NHS 24 on 111 or call your own GP.

Talking about suicidal thoughts

2. Ask directly



It is okay to **ask about suicidal thoughts directly** and to **use the word suicide.**.The only way to understand risk is to ask about it. Doing so won't "put the idea in their head" or make things worse.

You might say: *"Sometimes when people feel really low, they think about suicide. Have you had thoughts like that?*

If your child says yes, stay calm and thank them for being honest. Let them know you'll help them get the support they need.

3. Listen without rushing to fix everything



Give your child the **time and space to share how they are feeling and listen non-judgmentally.** Don't rush the conversation - allow for silences and avoid jumping in with lots of questions. Try not to fix everything - just being present matters and shows you care.

You might say: *"Thank you for telling me. I'm really glad you did. I'm here for you, and we'll figure this out together."*



For life-threatening emergencies, please dial 999.

For all other urgent concerns contact NHS 24 on 111 or call your own GP.



See more about this in Video 8

Planning a supportive conversation

Activity

Practicing what you might say before talking with your child about suicidal thoughts can help you feel more prepared and confident.

Take a few minutes to plan what you want to say. These questions can help:

- How will you start the conversation?
- What words could help your child feel safe and understood?
- What do you want them to know - for example, that you care, you're here to listen, they're not alone...

For life-threatening emergencies, please dial 999.
For all other urgent concerns contact NHS 24 on 111 or call your own GP.

See more about this in Video 8

Seeking Help with Suicidal Thoughts

URGENT SUPPORT:



Call 999 immediately if your child has seriously injured themselves, has attempted suicide, or if there is an immediate risk to their safety.

If you are concerned that your child is not safe, call 999 or take them to the nearest Accident & Emergency (A&E) department.

For other urgent mental health concerns contact NHS 24 on 111.

HELPLINES:

Talk to your child or young person about helplines, text services, and online chat services available to them.

Please see the *Resources* section for details.

Some of these services are available 24/7. Consider saving these contact details on your child's or young person's phone so they can access support when needed.

GP:

If you are worried about your child's or young person's mood, emotional wellbeing, or suicidal thoughts, but there is no immediate risk, you can contact your GP.

Your GP can:

- Talk through your concerns
- Recommend helpful resources and support services
- Refer your child for specialist support if needed

Resources: Getting Help

HELPLINES

- **Samaritans**: **116 123** - Available 24/7 for anyone in distress.
- **Childline**: **0800 1111** or 1-2-1 Counsellor chat - Available 24/7 for children and young people.
- **Shout**: Text 'SHOUT' to **85258** - A free, confidential text service for mental health support.
- **Young Minds Parents Helpline**: **0808 802 5544** - Free, confidential advice for parents.

WEBSITES

- **Young Minds:** www.youngminds.org.uk
- **Mind**: www.mind.org.uk
- **Anna Freud Centre:** www.annafreud.org
- **NHS Every Mind Matters:** www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters

For life-threatening emergencies, please dial 999.
For all other urgent concerns contact NHS 24 on 111 or call your own GP.

Resources

Self-help books

- **Overcoming teenage low mood and depression: A five areas approach** by N. Dummet and C. Williams
- **Am I depressed and what can I do about it? A CBT self-help guide for teenagers experiencing low mood and depression** by S. Reynolds and M. Parkinson
- **Defeating Teenage Depression: Getting there together**, by Roslyn Law - Free IPT worksheets can be downloaded here: https://overcoming.co.uk/459/Defeating-Teenage-Depression---Law
- **Think good feel good: A cognitive behavioural therapy workbook for children and young people** by P. Stallard

Exercise

- Braive's video on **'How exercise affects your body and mind'** https://youtu.be/Wto7zISB2d0
- **Anna Freud Centre –** *Using physical exercise to improve mental health, videos, ideas and tips:* www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/self-care/physicalexercise/
- **Exercise for Depression** https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/exercise-for-depression/

Resources

Diet

- **'How the food you eat affects brain'-** Video by Mia Nacamulli: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyQY8a-ng6g
- **NHS Eat Well website -** Includes advice on how to maintain a healthy and balanced diet: www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/
- **NHS Inform – The Eatwell Guide:** www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/food-and-nutrition/eating-well/eatwell-guide-how-to-eat-a-healthy-balanced-diet/

Sleep

- **Sleep Scotland** - Ten Steps to better sleep for teens https://sleepaction.org/learn-about-sleep/10-sleep-tips-for-teens/
- **'The 10 Commandments of Sleep' –** Video by the Sleep Council: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkmCDo3DQ_M

Increasing activity

- **Printable Activity Logs -** https://www.get.gg/docs/ACELog.pdf
- **Printable Activity Planner -** https://www.get.gg/docs/WeeklyPlanner.pdf
- **Values Worksheets -** https://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-worksheets/values/adolescents

Resources

Increasing activity (cont.)

Centre for Clinical Intervention (CCI):

- **The Vicious Cycle of Depression Information Sheet:** https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/~/media/CCI/Mental-Health-Professionals/Depression/Depression---Information-Sheets/Depression-Information-Sheet---04---Vicious-Cycle-for-Depression.pdf

- **Information Sheet Behavioural Activation:** https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/ACE.pdf

- **Behavioural Strategies for Managing Depression:** https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/-/media/CCI/Consumer-Modules/Back-from-The-Bluez/Back-from-the-Bluez---02---Behavioural-Strategies.pdf

Managing unhelpful thoughts

- **Moodjuice**: Challenging unhelpful thoughts and problem solving https://www.mcgill.ca/counselling/files/counselling/depression_moodjuice_self-help_guide.pdf

Centre for Clinical Intervention (CCI):

- **Unhelpful thinking styles** https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/~/media/CCI/Consumer-Modules/Back-from-The-Bluez/Back-from-the-Bluez---05---Unhelpful-Thinking-Styles.pdf

- **Challenging unhelpful thoughts** https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/~/media/CCI/Consumer-Modules/Back-from-The-Bluez/Back-from-the-Bluez---06---Detective-Work-and-Disputation.pdf

Resources

Self-harm

- **Harmless** – Includes a range of information and support for people who self-harm www.harmless.org.uk

- **National Self Harm Network** (section for parents) http://www.nshn.co.uk/downloads.html

- **Penumbra**– For people aged 16 years old and over and who self-harm https://ithriveedinburgh.org.uk/services/edinburgh-self-harm-project-penumbra/

References

[1] **Hetrick, S.E., McKenzie, J.E., Bailey, A.P., *et al*.** (2021) *New generation antidepressants for depression in children and adolescents: a network meta-analysis (Cochrane Review)*. Issue 5. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. http://www.cochranelibrary.com [Free Full-text]

[2] **National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE).** (2019). *Depression in children and young people: Identification and management (NICE Guideline NG134)*. https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/NG134

[3] **Croydon Borough Team.** (2011, December 1). *Protocol for assessment and treatment of depression in primary care*. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. https://www.nice.org.uk/media/default/sharedlearning/624_CroydonDepressionGuidelineFINAL1DEC11.pdf

[4] **National Health Service (NHS).** (n.d.). *Mental health*. https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/

[5] **Reynolds, S., & Pass, L.** (2020). *Brief behavioural activation for adolescent depression: A clinician's manual and session-by-session guide*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

[6] **Hawton, K., Bergen, H., Kapur, N., Cooper, J., Steeg, S., Ness, J., & Waters, K.** (2012). Repetition of self-harm and suicide following self-harm in children and adolescents: Findings from the Multicentre Study of Self-harm in England. *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry*, *53*(12), 1212-1219.

[7] **Law, R.** (2016). *Defeating Teenage Depression: Getting There Together*. Hachette UK.