Depression: what people think it feels like versus what is actually feels like

Depression is more than just being sad.

This is what people *think* it feels like

This is what it *actually* feels like (this will range from person to person).

Some people with depression describe their symptoms as **the black dog**. The black dog is a metaphor for something that is keeping you down and never leaving you alone.

The black dog can also represent the importance of training and looking after your mental health, as it is a big responsibility in life!
What is happening in the brain when you’re experiencing low mood?

The body and mind undergoes changes to handle low mood. Below are a few examples of what is occurring:

The brain requires more energy

- A healthy brain uses 20% of the energy that is absorbed from food.
- People with low mood often find they have higher levels of fatigue or poor concentration. To restore energy levels quickly, the brain may signal them to snack more. This can lead to unhealthy eating habits.

When depressed, you think, suffer and reason in search of solutions (this is called ‘rumination’)

- Rumination can make it harder for people to sleep as you’re thinking of many different things.
- Negative ruminating thoughts can creep in when we question our self worth. This can impact our memory for the positive things in life.

A depressed brain generates less chemicals that make you happy and motivated.

- The scientific term for this neurotransmitter is called ‘serotonin’. Serotonin is the ‘feel good’ chemical that contributes to well-being, good mood and appetite.
- Some antidepressants target serotonin pathways to improve the transmission of messages between neurons.
What is good mental health?

Good mental health can be defined as:

“A state of well-being that allows you to cope with the normal stresses of life and function productively.”

Below are the core domains of a good mental health compass:

- **Positive view of self**
  - e.g. High self-esteem

- **Positive view on life**
  - E.g. Staying optimistic, despite difficulties

- **Good social skills**
  - e.g. Empathy and cooperation

- **Self-care management**
  - e.g. Hygiene, makeup, eat healthy, sleep quality

- **Healthy coping mechanisms to manage stress**
  - e.g. Mindfulness, breathing exercises or going for a walk

- **Positive relationships**
  - e.g. Choosing to spend time with people who support you and look out for you.

- **Regulate emotions**
  - e.g. Control anger towards stress

- **Good physical health**
  - e.g. Exercise
What to do if you are feeling...

Stressed? Anxious? Feeling down or upset after a bad day? Below are our top suggestions for improving your mood.

- **Like you’re having a bad day**
  - 1) **Take a break.** Make time to listen to music, go for a walk or chat with people that will cheer you up.
  - 2) **Check your basic needs:** Think about whether you’re hungry, thirsty or tired - and eat, drink or rest if you need to.
  - 3) **Treat yourself to self-care:** Protect your time and focus on yourself with some self-care (e.g. have a relaxing bath or treat yourself to something nice).

- **Stressed**
  - 1) **Do something enjoyable that helps you feel calm:** walk, meditate, practice mindfulness or listen to your favourite music.
  - 2) **Break big problems into smaller ones.** List all the jobs you’re stressing about and put them in order of priority. Set a time to complete them with no distractions.
  - 3) **Let your stress out.** Express your emotions through art (e.g. write in a mood journal, draw some artwork, dance), go for a run or punch into a pillow.

- **Anxious or worried**
  - 1) **Take slow, deep breaths:** By controlling your breathing you can control your emotions. Breathe in for 4 seconds, breathe out for 6 seconds (and repeat 6-8 times).
  - 2) **Challenge your negative thought:** Untwist your way of thinking by asking yourself what a good friend would say about you at that moment.
  - 3) **Give yourself time to worry:** Write them all down, big and small. When you are ready, decide which worries on your list can be fixed the next day.

- **Sad or depressed**
  - 1) **Speak up.** It is important you chat to someone you can trust about how you feel.
  - 2) **Distract yourself:** Do something that keeps you moving (exercise, meet friends, listen to music or work on a hobby).
  - 3) **Improve your thoughts of self-worth:** Write things you like about yourself, what you are proud of or what you’re good at. Read this to yourself every morning.
What happens when you call for help?

Samaritans provide a safe space to discuss anything that is bothering you, no matter how big or small your issues are. Below is a clear guide on what to expect if you or a friend call Samaritans (free on 116 123).

1) A volunteer will answer
Someone will answer with something like “Samaritans, can I help you?”

2) You talk, we listen
Below are the most common calls to Samaritans (but call them even if your problem is not presented here):

3) Samaritans give you space to be yourself, and they won’t tell you what to do.
They will help you explore your feelings and help guide you to your own decisions.

4) Safeguarding = making sure you’re safe
The information you provide will not be told to anyone else. However, if your health is at risk (such as suicide attempt), it is their job to do something to make sure you are safe.
NO, YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

YES, WE FEEL THIS WAY SOMETIMES.

NO, YOU WON'T ALWAYS FEEL LIKE THIS.

YES, THE WORLD IS A BETTER PLACE WITH YOU IN IT.
Contacting the research team: the MRC Cognition & Brain Sciences Unit

Who are we?
A team of scientists within the Cognition, Emotion & Mental Health Programme. We are based at the MRC-Cognition & Brain Sciences Unit.

To learn more about what we do, scan the QR code to the right and read more about our cutting-edge research.

Want to participate in cutting-edge research?
Great! We always welcome volunteers. Please email us and we will guide you to someone who could help.

Note: not all our studies are available to everyone, but we will do our best to help you.

Do you have a question for us?
We are a friendly team and welcome any questions you may have.

If you have any questions about the Cognition, Emotion & Mental Health Programme at the MRC-CBU, contact Tim (Tim.Dalgleish@mrc-cbu.cam.ac.uk)

If you have any questions about this book, contact Kirsty (Kirsty.griffiths@mrc-cbu.cam.ac.uk)