

# coping with stress



## Stress and Stressors

Stress is something that is part of normal life, in that it is experienced by everyone from time-to-time. However, some people suffer from stress which is so frequent or so severe that it can seriously impact on their quality of life. Stress can come from a huge range of sources (*stressors*), such as:

- ◇ Relationships with others
- ◇ Work-related issues
- ◇ Study demands
- ◇ Coping with illness
- ◇ Life changes, such as marriage, retirement, divorce
- ◇ Day-to-day activities and tasks
- ◇ Positive events, such as organising holidays or parties
- ◇ Juggling many roles or tasks at the same time



Some people are aware of what tends to trigger their stress, and this increases their ability to either prevent stress or to handle it more effectively. Many others are less able to deal with stress, and identifying stressors is a key step in this. If you often experience stress, take some time to consider what tends to set it off for you.

## Symptoms of Stress

Some people do not even notice that they are stressed until symptoms begin to occur, including:

- ◇ Irritability or moodiness
- ◇ Interrupted sleep
- ◇ Worrying or feeling of anxiety
- ◇ Back and neck pain
- ◇ Frequent headaches, minor to migraine
- ◇ Upset stomach
- ◇ Increased blood pressure
- ◇ Changes in appetite
- ◇ Rashes or skin breakouts
- ◇ Chest pains
- ◇ Making existing physical problems worse
- ◇ More susceptible to cold/flu and slower recovery

These symptoms reduce quality of life, and people suffering from stress may notice that work performance or relationships suffer more as a result. You may be able to use some the strategies listed here, or you may find it useful to consult a professional for more help.

## Stress Management Tips

- 1) **Identify your stressors**, and see if there are some things within your control to manage better. Some things will be beyond your control, for example if you work a job that is based on working towards deadlines then you can't change this without changing jobs. But perhaps you can control some aspects, such as scheduling to have at least a short lunch break each day, or to go to bed earlier so that you have more energy to cope with the daytime.
- 2) Build **regular exercise** into your life - as well as being part of a healthy, balanced lifestyle and giving you more energy, many people find that working out at the gym or playing sport helps them to unwind.
- 3) Make sure that you **eat and sleep well**.
- 4) **Take time out** for family, friends and recreational activities. Most of us know that this is important but we do not all do it. If you find it hard to make time for this, perhaps you need to take deliberate steps to have time out, such as set aside one evening a week where you meet up with friends or enjoy a hobby, or set aside one day of the weekend for relaxing at home.
- 5) **Problem-solving techniques** can be a useful way of clarifying the problem, brainstorming possible solutions, and then choosing one to put into action after listing the pros and cons of each option. See the handout *Problem Solving* for more details about this.
- 6) **Learn calming techniques** such as controlled breathing and progressive muscle relaxation, to train your mind and body to become more relaxed. These techniques require practice but can be helpful with regular use. See handouts *Calming Technique* and *Progressive Muscle Relaxation*.
- 7) You may wish to speak to a professional about **assertiveness training and communication skills** which can help you to deal with challenging situations more effectively, thereby reducing stress. See the handout *Assertive Communication*.
- 8) Last but definitely not least, consider whether there is **negative thinking** which is contributing to your stress. Negative thinking can make us worry more than is necessary, increasing stress, and generally does not motivate us to take positive actions. See the handouts *Thinking & Feeling*, *Analysing Your Thinking* and *Changing Your Thinking*.



# thinking & feeling

People often believe that the feelings and emotions they experience are determined by external events, situations, and the behaviour of others. For example, we may hear ourselves say, "My boss made me so nervous," "My partner made me so angry," "This trip down south made me feel so relaxed," or "I'm depressed because I didn't get the job I wanted." What is the assumption underlying these statements? That someone or something other than ourselves was directly determining the feelings we experienced.

We come to these conclusions automatically without asking ourselves if this assumption is true. However, if we stop to analyse the process that links an external situation to our emotional responses, we will find that there is a step in between.

## How Our Thoughts Influence Our Feelings

What really makes us feel and respond the way we do, is often not the situation or the words and actions of another person, but how we perceive that situation or that person's actions. It is how we see something or someone and what we think about it or them that really influences how we feel. It is our thoughts and beliefs about an event that significantly influences our emotions and actions.

Here's an example. Suppose you went to a party and your host introduces you to Mike. As you talk to him, you notice that he does not look directly at you but often looks around the room. How would you feel if you thought, "Boy, this guy is so rude! He won't even look at me while I'm talking with him! How nasty!" What if you thought, "Mike must think that I'm really unattractive and uninteresting. I must be a really boring person. Nobody wants to talk to me!" What about if you were to think, "Mike's probably waiting for a friend to come. Maybe he's getting a bit anxious." You probably realised that you felt three different emotions as a result of those three different thoughts. Often, we are not aware of our thoughts and beliefs because they are so automatic and happen quickly. But they are there, and they affect the way we feel.

## What am I Feeling?

It is often difficult to know exactly what we are feeling, and sometimes it can also be difficult to put it into words. The list below contains words that describe feelings, and this might be a useful starting point in you being able to understand the connection between your thinking and your feelings.

### Words That Describe Feelings

Tense	Enraged	Frightened	Cheerful
Annoyed	Happy	Panicky	Euphoric
Unhappy	Exhilarated	Frustrated	Mad
Exuberant	Keyed-up	Scared	Uneasy
Anxious	Irritated	Flat	Sad
Depressed	Joyful	Tired	Discouraged
Angry	Excited	Nervous	Jealous

This is only a limited list but it should give you an idea of the kinds of words we could use to describe our feelings.

## Automatic thoughts

Just as we are not always conscious of the way we walk or how we drive a car, we are often not aware of our thinking. Some of our thinking is so habitual that it is automatic, and just like driving, when things are automatic, we might not be conscious of them. All of the time, our brains are turning over thoughts and ideas. However, we are not consciously aware of most of them because it happens relatively fast and we are not accustomed to slowing them down. Our automatic thoughts, however, play an important role in our emotional well-being.

There are three kinds of automatic thoughts:

**Neutral thoughts**, e.g. "I think I will buy some bread today."

**Positive thoughts**, e.g. "This is something I can do really well."

**Negative thoughts**, e.g. "I often find it hard to concentrate – I must be really stupid."



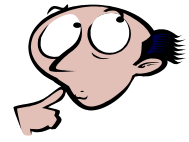
Automatic thoughts often reflect worries and concerns, however they can be about anything at all, anything we have ever seen, heard or learned. In addition, it can be anything we know about from any source at all. Obviously, though, negative automatic thoughts are the ones that can cause us emotional distress. People who are depressed tend to think negative thoughts about themselves, the world about them, and their future, and it is these thoughts that can be changed to lift your depression.

## Feelings are not Thoughts

When we first try to distinguish thoughts from feelings, it can be easy to confuse them. We might be used to talking about thoughts and feelings as being part of the same experience, but it is more helpful to separate them and remember that feelings are not thoughts. For example, you might hear a person saying "I *think* I'm anxious," but they're probably *thinking* "Everyone will laugh at me," and *feel* anxious. More commonly, you might hear someone saying something like "I *feel* that my partner doesn't appreciate the gift I bought for him," when they are actually *thinking* "My partner doesn't appreciate the gift I bought for him," and *feel* hurt.

Being aware of your feelings and your thoughts is the first step towards feeling better. If thinking influences feelings, then it makes sense that if you want to change the way you feel, you need to change the way you think. Look out for the information flyer entitled "Changing the Way You Think" for more details on how to do this.

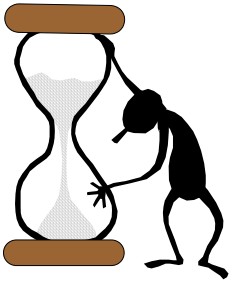
# postpone your worry



Worry can occur at any time or place, often without you being aware of its exact triggers. As such, worry can be very interfering when going about your daily life. A strategy to deal with this problem is to postpone your worry to a particular worry period. By learning to postpone your worry, it will be less intrusive in your life and you will be managing your worry effectively, giving you a greater sense of control. The steps to postpone your worry are outlined below. Be prepared to practice this approach over and over again. It does take some time and patience.

## 1. Create a worry period:

- To begin, choose a particular time, place, and length of time for worrying. This time, place and duration should be the same each day (e.g. 6pm, study, 20 min)
- Make this place unique and comfortable, free from distractions. It should not be somewhere you go to regularly, like a lounge room chair. Rather somewhere you assign for the worry period only.



- The time should be convenient so you can regularly follow through with the task, and not close to bed time.

## 2. Postpone your worry:

- As soon as you become aware of a worry, postpone it to the worry period.
- Note your worry briefly on paper (in a couple of words only). Carrying a small notebook with you may be useful.
- **Remind yourself** that you will have time to think about it later, no need to worry about it now; you will be in a better position to deal with the worry in the worry period; and there are more important or pleasant things to attend to right now, rather than worry.
- Turn your focus to the present moment and the activities of the day to help let go of the worry until the worry period has arrived. **Tip:** see the **What is mindfulness?** or use the **Letting go of Worry with Mindfulness** sheets for help in doing this.
- Finally, decide what is the most important and best thing you can practically do for yourself right now. Take immediate action to do something that is either practical, positive, pleasant, active or nurturing.



## 3. Come back to your worries at the designated worry period:

When your worry period comes around, settle yourself down at the place you had planned and take some time to reflect on the worries you had written down from the day. Some points to remember are:

- Only worry about the things you have noted if you feel you **must**.
- If all or some of the worries you wrote down are no longer bothering you or no longer seem relevant, then no further action is required.
- If you do need to worry about some of them, spend no longer than the set amount of time you specified for your worry period. It may also be helpful to write your thoughts on paper rather than worrying in your head. You can do this in whatever way feels right to you.



**Note:** Later on you will learn more specifically what to do with your worries, but for now just focus on the process of postponing your worries throughout the day and only worrying at a set time of the day.

Worry postponement may seem like a strange thing to do, and it may seem like an effort to carry a notepad around to jot down your worries and commit to sitting down and reflecting on the days worries at a set time everyday.

It is important to do this at the start because it is a difficult and new skill you are developing. But with time and practice in this formal way, you will be able to do it effectively more informally. Also, typically people predict that they won't be able to postpone their worrying, but often people are surprised that they are actually able to postpone many of their worries, and experience a greater sense of control.

# adjusting rules & assumptions



## Helpful & Unhelpful Rules

Rules and assumptions for living guide our behaviour and enable us to cope with our everyday lives. They are necessary for us to make sense of the world around us and to help us function on a day-to-day basis. So, having rules, in itself, is not unhelpful. There are many rules for living that are helpful (eg. you should not drink and drive). **Helpful rules** are realistic, flexible, and adaptable, and they enable us to function healthily and safely. **Unhelpful rules** are unrealistic, unreasonable, excessive, rigid, and unadaptable (eg. I must never ask for help). We will probably feel strong negative emotions when these rules are broken, which is quite likely given that they are unrealistic.

*Rules are learned.* It is not often that unhelpful rules are formally taught. Rather these are developed through trial and error and observations you made in your earlier life experiences.

*Rules can be culture-specific.* The rules and assumptions for living that you have developed reflect the norms and culture of the family and the society or community in which you grew up.

*Rules can be stubborn and resist change.* Rules for living not only guide your behaviour, they also influence how you perceive, interpret, and absorb information throughout your life. We tend to only pay attention to, and make sense of, those things that are consistent with our beliefs and rules. This is why unhelpful rules for living and negative core beliefs can be resistant to change.

## Unhelpful Rules & Low Self-Esteem

To help you get by and manage from day to day, you might have developed rules and assumptions to help protect your self-esteem. You will have developed rules and assumptions as best you can in the world, given the low opinion you have of yourself. These rules and assumptions are usually unrealistic, unreasonable, rigid, and unadaptable. If you are able to stick to, and carry out, these rules and assumptions, you might feel okay about yourself, because then no one will know how bad or worthless you think you are.



But these rules actually keep your negative core beliefs and your low self-esteem in place. Living up to such rules and assumptions means that your behaviour is restricted in such a way that these rules and your negative core beliefs do not have the opportunity to be challenged to see if they are accurate

## Identifying Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

To identify what unhelpful rules and assumptions you might have developed to get by given your negative view of yourself, ask yourself:

*What do I expect of myself when I am at work or school?*

*What standards do I expect myself to meet?*

*What do I expect of myself when I am socialising?*

*What do I expect of myself in my various roles – child, friend, partner, parent, staff member/supervisor?*

*What do I expect of myself regarding leisure or fun activities, and self-care?*

*In what types of situations do I put myself down?*

*What aspects of myself do I criticise most?*

*What might happen if I relax my standards?*

*What don't I allow myself to do?*

*What do I criticise in other people? What standards do I expect them to live up to?*



You might also identify rules and expectations by:

- Reviewing your thought diaries
- Considering themes which are common to your issues
- Recalling direct messages or family sayings about rules, such as *the only person you can depend on is yourself* or *if you don't aim high you'll never be successful*

## Adjusting The Rules

Adjusting the rules isn't easy, but it might not be that difficult if you have already had some practice at challenging your biased expectations and negative self-evaluations. We suggest the worksheet *Adjusting The Rules* which helps you challenge unhelpful rules and assumptions through:

- Questioning their impact and helpfulness
- Identifying their advantages and disadvantages
- Developing new balanced rules and assumptions
- Thinking of new ways of behaving that would put the new rule into practice.

It might be a good idea to write down your new rules on a card that you can carry around with you and review every now and again. It is important to put the new rule into practice through new behaviours. That is, by acting as if the new, more flexible and realistic rule were true, and seeing what happens! Although it might seem difficult to you now, it will get easier as you keep practicing.

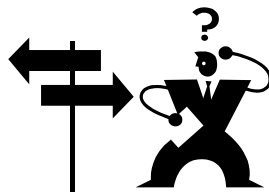
# accepting uncertainty



The inability to tolerate uncertainty is an **attitude** many people have towards life. When one has this attitude, uncertainty, unpredictability, and doubt are seen as awful and unbearable experiences that must be avoided at all costs.

If you hate uncertainty, then you may perceive worrying to be useful to you. You may think that worrying is a way of preparing yourself for the worst – getting you ready for anything that might happen. Worrying might be seen as a way of attempting to predict life so that there are no nasty surprises. As such, worrying reduces your experience of uncertainty and unpredictability. And because worrying reduces your feelings of uncertainty, you will continue worrying and worrying and worrying. In other words, worrying helps you believe that you have more control and certainty in life.

In reality, has your worrying made anything more certain or more predictable? Does worrying really change the outcome of what will happen? Unfortunately, life is still as uncertain and unpredictable as it ever was, it is only your perception that you somehow have more control that has changed. But is this really true? In fact, all you have done is think of all the worst case scenarios, worked yourself up, made yourself feel really bad in the process and often paralysed yourself from taking any action. So, ask yourself, is worrying about uncertainty really worth it? Maybe it is time to consider a different way?



There are two main strategies for learning how to accept uncertainty and thus reduce worry.

## 1. Challenging Intolerance of Uncertainty

Ask yourself the following questions and write down your responses. See if you can come to an understanding of the disadvantages and problems of being intolerant of uncertainty.

- Is it possible to be certain about everything in life?
- What are the advantages of requiring certainty, versus the disadvantages? Or, how is needing certainty in life helpful and unhelpful?

- Do you tend to predict bad things will happen just because they are uncertain? Is this a reasonable thing to do? What is the likelihood of positive or neutral outcomes?
- How likely is it that things you predict will happen? Is it possible to live with the small chance that something negative may happen, given its likelihood is very low?
- Can you live with some of the uncertainties of life? How do you do this? And can you do this in other situations you find difficult?
- Ask a friend how they cope with uncertainty, see if you can learn a few tips from them?

## 2. Acceptance and Mindfulness

When you are intolerant of uncertainty, your mind tends to be focused on the future. An antidote to this style of thinking is to practice becoming more present focused and accepting of your current experience. That is, more mindful. The steps to being more accepting and mindful are explained in the infosheets *What is Mindfulness?* and *Mindfulness & Letting Go*. Three basic steps to follow are:

- **Being aware** of what you are currently thinking and what you are feeling in your body. Use the feeling of your breath to remain present. What are you noticing when you are needing certainty? Acknowledge these thoughts and feelings, maybe saying “ah, so that's how it is”.
- **Letting go** of the need for a quick fix, by saying something to help you let go of the need for certainty. Maybe “it's only a need for certainty thought, just let it go”.
- **Being Non-judgmental**, by bringing a gentle curiosity to the thoughts that drift by without judging them or trying to change them. Then return your focus to the here and now of your experience. Focus your attention fully on sounds around you or sensations in the body, or your breath, or the task at hand.



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# sleep hygiene

## What is Sleep Hygiene?

'Sleep hygiene' is the term used to describe good sleep habits. Considerable research has gone into developing a set of guidelines and tips which are designed to enhance good sleeping, and there is much evidence to suggest that these strategies can provide long-term solutions to sleep difficulties.

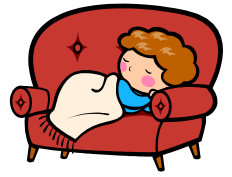
There are many medications which are used to treat insomnia, but these tend to be only effective in the short-term. Ongoing use of sleeping pills may lead to dependence and interfere with developing good sleep habits independent of medication, thereby prolonging sleep difficulties. Talk to your health professional about what is right for you, but we recommend good sleep hygiene as an important part of treating insomnia, either with other strategies such as medication or cognitive therapy or alone.

## Sleep Hygiene Tips

- 1) **Get regular.** One of the best ways to train your body to sleep well is to go to bed and get up at more or less the same time every day, even on weekends and days off! This regular rhythm will make you feel better and will give your body something to work from.
- 2) **Sleep when sleepy.** Only try to sleep when you actually feel tired or sleepy, rather than spending too much time awake in bed.
- 3) **Get up & try again.** If you haven't been able to get to sleep after about 20 minutes or more, get up and do something calming or boring until you feel sleepy, then return to bed and try again. Sit quietly on the couch with the lights off (bright light will tell your brain that it is time to wake up), or read something boring like the phone book. Avoid doing anything that is too stimulating or interesting, as this will wake you up even more.
- 4) **Avoid caffeine & nicotine.** It is best to avoid consuming any caffeine (in coffee, tea, cola drinks, chocolate, and some medications) or nicotine (cigarettes) for at least 4-6 hours before going to bed. These substances act as stimulants and interfere with the ability to fall asleep.
- 5) **Avoid alcohol.** It is also best to avoid alcohol for at least 4-6 hours before going to bed. Many people believe that alcohol is relaxing and helps them to get to sleep at first, but it actually interrupts the quality of sleep.
- 6) **Bed is for sleeping.** Try not to use your bed for anything other than sleeping and sex, so that your body comes to associate bed with sleep. If you use bed as a place to watch TV, eat, read, work on your laptop, pay bills, and other things, your body will not learn this connection.



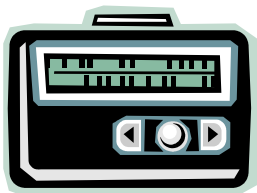
- 7) **No naps.** It is best to avoid taking naps during the day, to make sure that you are tired at bedtime. If you can't make it through the day without a nap, make sure it is for less than an hour and before 3pm.
- 8) **Sleep rituals.** You can develop your own rituals of things to remind your body that it is time to sleep - some people find it useful to do relaxing stretches or breathing exercises for 15 minutes before bed each night, or sit calmly with a cup of caffeine-free tea.
- 9) **Bathtime.** Having a hot bath 1-2 hours before bedtime can be useful, as it will raise your body temperature, causing you to feel sleepy as your body temperature drops again. Research shows that sleepiness is associated with a drop in body temperature.
- 10) **No clock-watching.** Many people who struggle with sleep tend to watch the clock too much. Frequently checking the clock during the night can wake you up (especially if you turn on the light to read the time) and reinforces negative thoughts such as "Oh no, look how late it is, I'll never get to sleep" or "it's so early, I have only slept for 5 hours, this is terrible."
- 11) **Use a sleep diary.** This worksheet can be a useful way of making sure you have the right facts about your sleep, rather than making assumptions. Because a diary involves watching the clock (see point 10) it is a good idea to only use it for two weeks to get an idea of what is going and then perhaps two months down the track to see how you are progressing.
- 12) **Exercise.** Regular exercise is a good idea to help with good sleep, but try not to do strenuous exercise in the 4 hours before bedtime. Morning walks are a great way to start the day feeling refreshed!
- 13) **Eat right.** A healthy, balanced diet will help you to sleep well, but timing is important. Some people find that a very empty stomach at bedtime is distracting, so it can be useful to have a light snack, but a heavy meal soon before bed can also interrupt sleep. Some people recommend a warm glass of milk, which contains tryptophan, which acts as a natural sleep inducer.
- 14) **The right space.** It is very important that your bed and bedroom are quiet and comfortable for sleeping. A cooler room with enough blankets to stay warm is best, and make sure you have curtains or an eyemask to block out early morning light and earplugs if there is noise outside your room.
- 15) **Keep daytime routine the same.** Even if you have a bad night sleep and are tired it is important that you try to keep your daytime activities the same as you had planned. That is, don't avoid activities because you feel tired. This can reinforce the insomnia.



# mindfulness and letting go

Trying to control or avoid worries or other negative thinking by answering back, chasing, or suppressing these negative thoughts can sometimes *strengthen* this negative experience rather than diminish it. Mindfulness is one way of skilfully disengaging from or letting go of negative thinking.

This approach involves practicing how to notice when you are automatically drifting into negative thinking and then skilfully redirecting your attention back to the present, to the here and now



It may be helpful to think of this approach in terms of a radio. That is, imagine that the negative thoughts that drift into your mind as coming from a loud

radio that is tuned to a station where the thoughts are very negative and seem to be shouting at you.

The skill in mindfulness is not so much about trying to turn the radio off, but changing the way you listen to the radio. In this way the volume of the radio station can be reduced, and therefore seem less disruptive and distressing.

However, the important thing to remember is this is not a quick fix, it is not easy, and requires regular practice. The thoughts may still shout at you, but you are changing the way you listen. Begin with the formal practice described in this information sheet. Just like any skill, such as learning a musical instrument, you need to practice, practice, practice! By practicing daily you may eventually become better at letting go, and be able to do things in a more informal way.



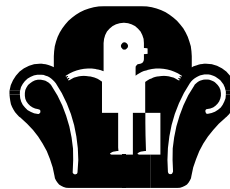
## Steps for Letting Go

To begin, it may be best to start by practicing with minor concerns before moving onto major worries or negative thoughts.



1) To begin the practice, sit down in a chair and adopt a relaxed and alert posture, then ask yourself, **what am I experiencing right now?** What thoughts are around, what feelings are around, and what body sensations?

Allow yourself to just acknowledge, observe and describe these experiences to yourself, without trying to change them or answer the thoughts back. Spend 30 seconds to 1 minute just doing this.



2) Now bringing **your focus of awareness to your breath**, focusing on the sensations of your breath as it moves back and forth in your belly. Binding your awareness to the back and forth movements of the sensations in your belly from moment to moment, and letting all thoughts go. Maybe say to yourself 'relax' or 'let go' on each outward breath. Spend about 30 seconds to 1 minute doing this.

3) Now **expanding your awareness to sensing your whole body breathing**, being aware of sensations throughout your body. If there are any strong feelings around, maybe saying to yourself "whatever it is, it is OK, just let me feel it." Allowing yourself to breathe with these feelings, and if your mind wanders to bothersome thoughts just acknowledge and let go of these - focussing back on sensing your breath. Continue doing this for about 1 minute.

**TIP:** You can try increasing the time of steps 2 & 3 as you start to get more familiar with this skill.

# staying healthy

Whatever form of treatment you have been receiving for your difficulties – medication or psychotherapy – it's important that you maintain whatever gains you have made. If you have been seeing a mental health practitioner, keep practising the strategies you might have learned in therapy. This means continuing to apply all the useful skills and insights about yourself you might have gained and they will soon be integrated into your lifestyle.

There are also some other things you can do in order to make the most of what you have learned to stay well or gain that extra improvement. Here are some suggestions:

## 1. Keep to a balanced routine & lifestyle

A chaotic lifestyle can be stressful in itself. Try to keep to a reasonably structured routine and a balanced lifestyle. This means making sure you maintain good eating, sleeping, and exercising habits, and engage in social activities that can be both fun and challenging.

## 2. Develop a good social support network

It is wise to find someone with whom you can sit down and have a good talk. This doesn't mean a therapy session where you pour out your heart but rather just a chance to talk through what's going on in your life, what your goals are, and generally just to ventilate with someone you trust. Often, problems seem bigger than they really are when a person tries to deal with them on their own. Hearing yourself talk through something can help to put it into perspective. Socialising is also fun and will help you to keep on track with scheduling of pleasant events.

## 3. Develop a good professional support network

Professional help is an important resource. Find a doctor or mental health practitioner with whom you can have a good professional relationship based on mutual trust and respect. Talk to them about your needs and concerns. Learn as much as possible about your illness and take an active role in making decisions about treatment and after-care.

## 4. Expect slip-ups and down days

Slip-ups in progress can happen at any time and are to be expected. Try not to fall into the trap of believing that you are 'back to square one' as this will only make you feel worse. Use your skills of challenging your thinking to help when this situation occurs. It might be useful to remind yourself that most people have 'down days' or days where life's hassles are harder to deal with – its part of being human! Also, you can use setbacks as a way of learning something new about yourself to help avoid similar problems in the future.

Remember – progress may be a bumpy road at times but it will be a rewarding journey on the whole!!!

Use the spaces below to jot down a few things you could do to remain healthy.

Thinking		
Social Activities		Pleasant Activities
Exercise		Relaxation
Professional Support		Social Support



# unhelpful thinking styles

When a person experiences an unhelpful emotion (eg, depression or anxiety), it is usually preceded by a number of unhelpful self-statements and thoughts. Often there is a pattern to such thoughts and we call these, "unhelpful thinking styles". One of the things we have noticed is that people use unhelpful thinking styles as an automatic habit. It is something that happens out of our awareness. However, when a person consistently and constantly uses some of these styles of thinking, they can often cause themselves a great deal of emotional distress. This information sheet describes a number of "unhelpful thinking styles". As you read through them, you might notice some thinking patterns and styles that you use consistently. Some of these styles might sound similar to one another. They are not meant to be distinct categories but to help you see if there is a kind of pattern to your thoughts.

## **Mental Filter:**

This thinking style involves a "filtering in" and "filtering out" process – a sort of "tunnel vision," focusing on only one part of a situation and ignoring the rest. Usually this means looking at the negative parts of a situation and forgetting the positive parts, and the whole picture is coloured by what may be a single negative detail.

## **Jumping to Conclusions:**

We jump to conclusions when we assume that we know what someone else is thinking (mind reading) and when we make predictions about what is going to happen in the future (predictive thinking).



## **Personalisation:**

This involves blaming yourself for everything that goes wrong or could go wrong, even when you may only be partly responsible or not responsible at all. You might be taking 100% responsibility for the occurrence of external events.

## **Catastrophising:**

Catastrophising occurs when we "blow things out of proportion", and we view the situation as terrible, awful, dreadful, and horrible, even though the reality is that the problem itself is quite small.

## **Black & White Thinking:**

This thinking style involves seeing only one extreme or the other. You are either wrong or right, good or bad and so on. There are no in-betweens or shades of gray.

## **Shoulding and Musting:**

Sometimes by saying "I should..." or "I must..." you can put unreasonable demands or pressure on yourself and others. Although these statements are not always unhelpful (eg "I should not get drunk and drive home"), they can sometimes create unrealistic expectations.

## **Overgeneralisation:**

When we overgeneralise, we take one instance in the past or present, and impose it on all current or future situations. If we say "You always..." or "Everyone...", or "I never..." then we are probably overgeneralising.

## **Labelling:**

We label ourselves and others when we make global statements based on behaviour in specific situations. We might use this label even though there are many more examples that aren't consistent with that label.



## **Emotional Reasoning:**

This thinking style involves basing your view of situations or yourself on the way you are feeling. For example, the only evidence that something bad is going to happen is that you feel like something bad is going to happen.

## **Magnification and Minimisation:**

In this thinking style, you magnify the positive attributes of other people and minimise your own positive attributes. It's as though you're explaining away your own positive characteristics