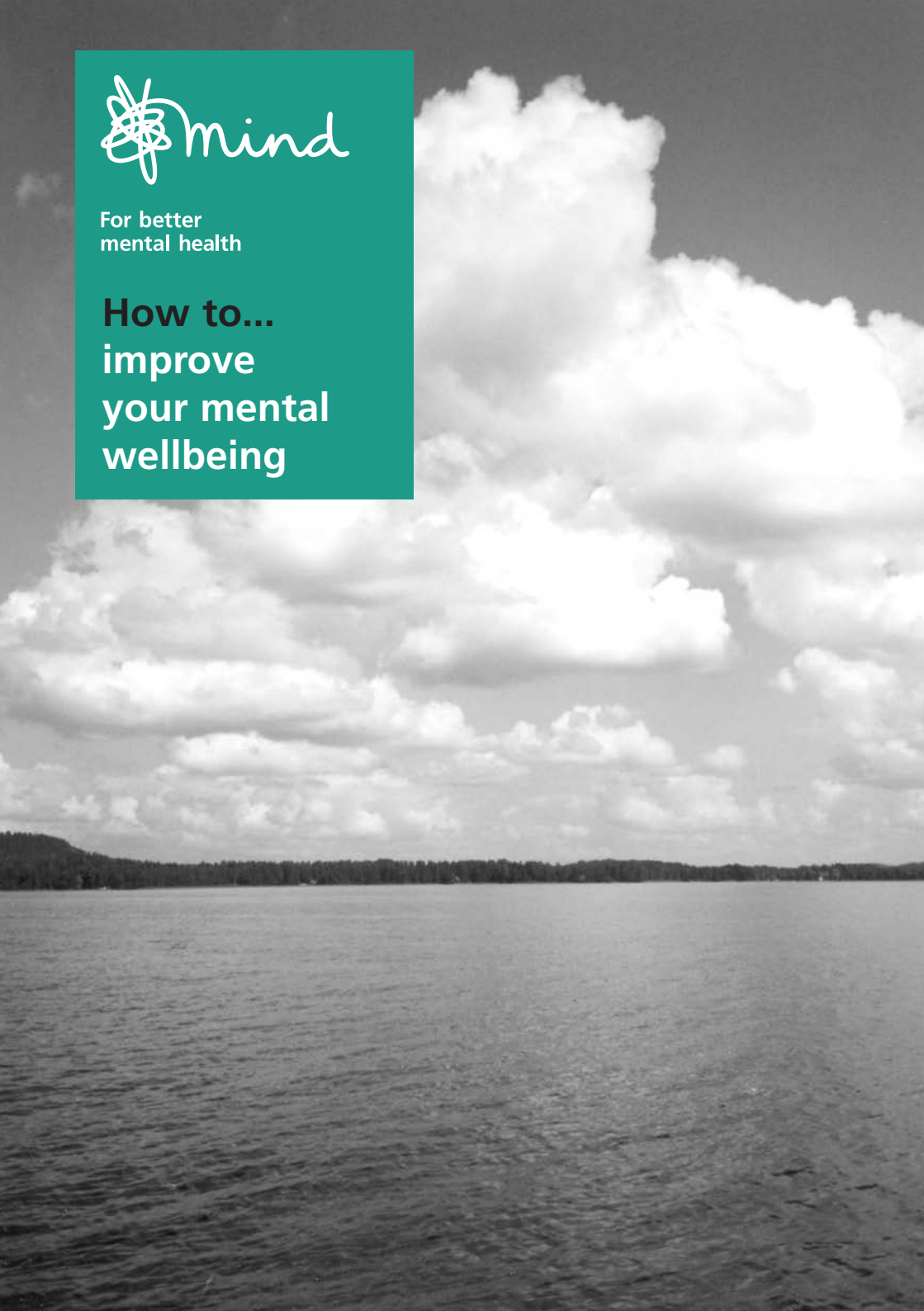




For better  
mental health

**How to...**  
**improve**  
**your mental**  
**wellbeing**



# How to... improve your mental wellbeing

**This booklet explains what keeps people mentally well, why some people may be more prone to mental distress, and what you can do to promote your mental wellbeing. It also tells you how to support someone else in distress.**



## **What do we mean by good mental health?**

Good mental health isn't something you have, but something you do. To be mentally healthy you must value and accept yourself. This means that:

- You care about yourself and you care for yourself. You love yourself, not hate yourself. You look after your physical health – eat well, sleep well, exercise and enjoy yourself.
- You see yourself as being a valuable person in your own right. You don't have to earn the right to exist. You exist, so you have the right to exist.
- You judge yourself on reasonable standards. You don't set yourself impossible goals, such as 'I have to be perfect in everything I do', and then punish yourself when you don't reach those goals.

If you don't value and accept yourself, you are always frightened that other people will reject you. To prevent people seeing how unacceptable you are, you keep them at a distance, and so you are always frightened and lonely. If you value yourself, you don't expect people to reject you. You aren't frightened of other people. You can be open, and so you enjoy good relationships.

If you value and accept yourself, you are able to relax and enjoy yourself, without feeling guilty. When you face a crisis, you know that, no matter how difficult the situation is, you will manage. How we see ourselves is central to every decision we make.

## **Why do some people become mentally distressed when others don't?**



We suffer mental distress when we don't value and accept ourselves. This way of thinking usually comes from childhood, when we decided that we must be bad and unacceptable, otherwise our family would not have treated us as they did. This makes it very difficult for us to cope with the difficulties and disasters we encounter.

All of us grow up with a set of ideas about who we are, what our life was and will be, and what the world is like. These ideas come from our past experience, and, because no two people ever have the same experience, no two people ever see things in exactly the same way. Our ideas aren't an exact picture of what's going on around us, but a set of guesses or theories about what's going on. If we grow up believing that the world is as we see it, then we're greatly shocked when we discover that things aren't the way we thought they were and that we've made a serious error of judgement.

Whenever we encounter some unexpected disaster, we discover that there's a serious discrepancy between what we thought our life was and what it actually is. Perhaps we thought our life was safe and secure, and then we suffered a terrorist attack. Perhaps we thought we were going to spend the rest of our life with one special person, and then that person left us, or died. Perhaps we'd grown up believing that if we were good, nothing bad would happen to us, and then something did.

If we discover we've made a serious error of judgement, we may start to doubt every judgement we've ever made. Then we can start to feel very shaky. We feel that we're crumbling, falling apart, disappearing.

# How to...

## improve your mental wellbeing

If we value and accept ourselves, we have confidence in ourselves, and, even though we're frightened, we tell ourselves that this feeling will pass, that we'll be able to meet the challenge and cope with whatever follows. If we don't value and feel positive about ourselves in this way, we feel that we're about to be annihilated as a person.

Whenever we fear that we are going to be annihilated, we have to find some defence to hold ourselves together. The less good we feel about ourselves, the more desperate the defence we resort to.

These defences might include:

- harming our body by injuring it or by starving it
- blaming ourselves for the disaster, and so becoming depressed
- locating the cause of our fear in the world around us and becoming too frightened to venture out
- rushing into the world around us and getting busier and busier
- trying to make everything secure by obsessively cleaning and checking
- retreating into our own inner world and giving up trying to make sense of the world around us in the way other people do.

We don't consciously choose a particular defence. Instead, we unconsciously and quickly resort to the one defence available to us because of the way we see ourselves and our world. For instance, if you are well practised in blaming yourself for everything that goes wrong, you'll blame yourself for the disaster that has befallen you.

### **Why is attitude so important?**

Mental distress is not compulsory. However, if we don't value and accept ourselves, we're making sure that we will feel mental distress when life is difficult. If we do feel positive about ourselves, then when we suffer loss, we feel sad, not depressed. So, when someone treats us badly, we feel angry, but not guilty because we feel angry. When someone or something threatens us, we feel frightened, but we're not overwhelmed, because we look after ourselves and make ourselves safe.



What causes us to become mentally distressed is not loss, or poverty, or sickness, or people treating us badly. It's how we interpret our loss, or poverty, or sickness, or the fact that people are treating us badly.

Many people defeat themselves by interpreting what happens to them in way that makes suffering inevitable. If we see ourselves as being bad and unacceptable, and we believe that we live in a 'just world' where goodness is rewarded and badness punished, then, when we suffer a disaster, we interpret the disaster as being the punishment for our wickedness. If we see ourselves as being insignificant and worthless then, when the chance for happiness comes along, we say to ourselves, 'I wasn't meant to be happy.' If we are frightened of other people, when other people treat us badly we feel we've no right to stand up for ourselves.

If we desperately need other people around us, but see ourselves as unattractive and unlovable, we bury our anger. We let other people walk all over us, because we dare not show our displeasure in case other people reject us. If we believe that it's inevitable that other people will let us down and everything turn out badly, we'll not do anything to improve our life. So we suffer.

# How to... improve your mental wellbeing



## Isn't it all genetic?

Some people like to blame their genes or their fate for their misery, because then it seems that they're not responsible for what has happened to them. Many doctors like to blame some undiscovered gene or biochemical change for their patients' misery. This is because such doctors feel more comfortable with medical interpretations of events than with psychological interpretations. However, genes are very much affected by the environment, and despite the huge amount of time, money and effort that has been spent in the search for the genes that directly cause mental disorders, none has been discovered.

## Serotonin levels

Changes in the levels of the chemicals (neurotransmitters) serotonin and noradrenaline have been found in the brains of people who are depressed - but not always. The biochemical changes that are associated with depression may be the result of the mood change rather than the cause of it, and no biochemical change has been found to precede the onset of depression. It is not correct to say that depression is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain.

## Genetics

It's often claimed that research shows that depression runs in families and is therefore genetically inherited. But analysis of this research still leaves this open to question. We usually inherit a lot about our environment from our parents as well as our genes. Much of what we get from our parents, is through learning. We can learn, from our family, ways of thinking that lead to distress. If a mother is constantly frightened and pessimistic, her child is likely to grow up believing that the world is a terrible place, and so the child becomes frightened and pessimistic.



### **What can I do about it?**

Accept that you can change. Nobody stays the same, so you may as well change for the better. The big change that you need to make is to come to value and accept yourself. If you've spent most of your life believing that you're unacceptable and of little value, it's hard to change, because all your ideas and ways of behaving are based on that assumption.

The trick is to say to yourself, 'I don't think much of myself, but from now on I'm going to act as if I'm my own best friend. I'm going to be kind to myself, look after myself, and stop criticising myself and putting myself down.' Acting as if you're your own best friend will lead you to become that.

You need to be very aware of how you talk to yourself. Listen to the voice in your head. Write down the hurtful, critical things that voice says to you, and then think of better, kinder, more encouraging things to say to yourself. For instance, when you have to do something, if you always say to yourself, 'You're sure to fail. You always make a mess of everything you do', write that down, and then beside it put, 'You're going to do the best you possibly can. It doesn't matter if you don't get it perfectly right, because the good thing about mistakes is that you learn from them.' Practise saying encouraging things to yourself.

Question the assumptions on which you base your ideas. Is it really true that everybody in the whole world hates you, or that everything you've ever done has turned out badly? Is it really true that every unfortunate thing that happens to you is your punishment for being such a wicked person? Look at the consequences of your ideas. If you don't get close to anyone because you fear being rejected, doesn't it follow that you will always be lonely?

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Try to remember how you came to think of yourself as being bad. Is this what your parents always told you? Were you really bad, or were they taking their bad feelings out on you? Are you frightened to recognise that your parents weren't perfect? No parents are ever perfect.

Writing these things down puts what you're thinking and feeling outside of yourself, and you can see it more clearly. Books can be helpful. Try reading, not just self-help books, but well-written novels, poems and biographies.

## Talk it through

Talk about these things to other people and find out how they see things. Talk to friends, call at a local drop-in centre, join a self-help group. Talking to a therapist or counsellor can be very helpful. There are many different kinds of therapies, but they all fall into one of two groups. There are prescriptive therapies and exploratory therapies. Prescriptive therapies, such as cognitive therapy, teach skills to overcome specific problems. Exploratory therapies, such as psychotherapy, explore your ideas and your experiences. Most therapists and counsellors use a bit of both.

Finding a therapist or counsellor can be difficult. Ask your GP whether there's a counsellor at their practice or whether she or he can refer you to an NHS psychologist or psychotherapist. See what your local Mind association has to offer. Look through the registers of psychotherapists and counsellors at your local library or on the internet (see *Useful organisations*). The fact that a psychotherapist's or counsellor's name is on a register isn't a guarantee that the person is an effective psychotherapist or counsellor. But it does mean that if something goes wrong, you can complain to that person's professional organisation. No therapist or counsellor can wave a magic wand and make you better, but they can act as a guide on your journey of self-discovery.



### **What can I do about the things I can't change?**



Remember, it's not what happens to us that causes our distress, but how we interpret what happens to us. If your mother always belittles and hurts you, and if you believe that you have to visit her every week, then you make sure that you suffer.

If you decide that it isn't strictly necessary to see her every week and it's your responsibility to look after yourself, then you can control how often and for how long you see her. You'll create an emotional distance between yourself and her by seeing her not as your mother, but as a woman who prefers the immediate satisfaction of taking her bad feelings out on someone, to the long-term satisfaction of having a loving child who wants to be with her.

Often we go on seeing parents who hurt us because we haven't given up the hope that one day they'll turn into the loving, accepting parents we always wanted. Some parents do become wiser, but don't know how to show it. You can test this out by asking them to talk over events in your childhood. You're not seeking to blame them, just wanting to get some things straight in your mind. Some parents are pleased to do this. They say, 'Those bad things did happen. I'm sorry'. Other parents who haven't become wiser say, 'How dare you suggest I wasn't perfect!'

If that's what your parents say, then you may have to give up hope of having loving, accepting parents. This is sad, but don't let this sadness and disappointment dominate your life. Find an interpretation of what has happened with which you can live.

# How to... improve your mental wellbeing

This is what you need to do with all the things in your life that you can't change. Don't let these things dominate your life, taking up all your time and effort. Even when life is at its most difficult, make sure that, every day, you give yourself something nice. This could be a treat, or time to do nothing but rest, chat with a friend, look at nature, or listen to music. Even if nobody else is looking after you, you can look after yourself.



## **How can I stay well while caring for others who are in mental distress?**

People who have gone through a period of mental distress will often say afterwards how much they appreciated having someone who was there for them, who encouraged and supported them, even though they did not show their appreciation at the time.

People in mental distress are struggling to hold themselves together as a person. It's a fight for survival, and so often in this situation become extremely selfish. They can't see anything of what other people are going through, and so they become very difficult to live with. They see everything in stark terms, in black and white, with no shades of grey. Their sense of humour vanishes, and the most ordinary things become sources of anxiety, even terror. They can be quite reasonable one minute and totally unreasonable the next. Friends and family, no matter how loving and concerned they are, must take care of themselves.

If you're looking after someone in mental distress, it's vital that you have time to yourself to recover, to rest, and to enjoy some recreation. You shouldn't feel guilty about this. If you don't look after yourself, you'll be unable to look after anyone else.

When we see someone suffering anxiety, fear and despair, or being depressed, or hearing horrible voices, we long to take their suffering away from them. However, we shouldn't feel that it's our duty to make the person better, and that if they don't get better that we have failed. The truth is, only one person has the power to make that person better. We can give support and encouragement, we can give love and comfort, we can listen and try to understand, and all this can help the person. But it's the person who has to decide to change.

The person has to accept that they can change, and then to risk changing; that is, to act without guarantees or certainty about what change will mean. This isn't easy. Many of us decide to stay with the devil we know because, painful though that is, we feel secure in our misery, because we know what it is. It takes courage to decide to change.

I know many people who found that courage and now enjoy their life. All of them were very different people, living in very different circumstances, but each of them can say what was the important wisdom they learnt. It was, 'I am responsible for myself. The only person who can save me is me. I value and accept myself, and so I look after myself.'

### References

- Beyond fear* D. Rowe (HarperCollins 1996)
- Breaking the bonds* D. Rowe (HarperCollins 1996)
- Depression: the way out of your prison* D. Rowe (Routledge 2002)
- Guide to life* D. Rowe (HarperCollins 1996)
- The origins of unhappiness* D. Smail (Constable & Robinson 2002)

# How to... improve your mental wellbeing

## Useful organisations

### Mind

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest local Mind association, contact the Mind website: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk) or MindinfoLine on 0845 766 0163.

### British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

tel. 0161 797 4494 web: [www.babcp.com](http://www.babcp.com)  
Can provide details of accredited therapists

### British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

tel. 0870 443 5252 minicom: 0870 443 5162  
web: [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)  
See website for details of local practitioners

### The British Psychological Society

tel. 0116 254 9568, web: [www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)  
Publishes a directory of chartered psychologists across the UK

### Carers UK

carers line: 0808 808 7777 web: [www.carersonline.org.uk](http://www.carersonline.org.uk)  
Information and advice on all aspects of caring

**The Institute for Complementary Medicine (ICM)**

tel. 020 7237 5165 web: [www.i-c-m.org.uk](http://www.i-c-m.org.uk)

Provides information and a list of professional, competent practitioners

**The Institute for Optimum Nutrition**

tel. 020 8614 7800 web: [www.ion.ac.uk](http://www.ion.ac.uk)

Charity dedicated to principles of optimum nutrition and to further the knowledge and practice of nutritional therapy as a complementary treatment to traditional forms of medicine

**Relate**

tel. 01788 573 241 or 0845 456 1310

web: [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

Offers counselling for adults with relationship difficulties

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## Further reading

- The assertiveness workbook: how to express your ideas and stand up for yourself at work and in relationships* R. J. Paterson (New Harbinger Press 2000) £13.99
- Confidence works: learn to be your own life coach* G. McMahon (Sheldon Press 2001) £7.99
- Depression: the way out of your prison* (3rd ed) D. Rowe (Brunner-Routledge 2003) £9.99
- Conquering fear* D. Rowe (Mind 2003) £1
- Heal the hurt: how to forgive and move on* A. Macaskill (Sheldon Press 2002) £6.99
- How to accept yourself* Dr W. Dryden (Sheldon Press 1999) £7.99
- How to assert yourself* (Mind 2006) £1
- How to cope with relationship problems* (Mind 2006) £1
- How to increase your self-esteem* (Mind 2007) £1
- How to look after yourself* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to stop worrying* (Mind 2006) £1
- How to survive family life* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to survive mid-life crisis* (Mind 2006) £1
- Making sense of cognitive behaviour therapy* (Mind 2007) £2.50
- Making sense of counselling* (Mind 2004) £2.50
- Making sense of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis* (Mind 2004) £2.50
- Overcoming low self-esteem: a self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques* M. Fennell (Robinson 1999) £9.99
- The Mind guide to managing stress* (Mind 2006) £1
- The Mind guide to physical activity* (Mind 2006) £1
- The Mind guide to relaxation* (Mind 2006) £1
- Relaxation: exercises and inspirations for wellbeing* S. Brewer (DBP 2003) £4.99
- Understanding anxiety* (Mind 2006) £1
- Understanding depression* (Mind 2007) £1
- Understanding mental illness* (Mind 2006) £1
- Understanding talking treatments* (Mind 2005) £1

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## Mind's mission

- Our vision is of a society that promotes and protects good mental health for all, and that treats people with experience of mental distress fairly, positively, and with respect.
- The needs and experiences of people with mental distress drive our work and we make sure their voice is heard by those who influence change.
- Our independence gives us the freedom to stand up and speak out on the real issues that affect daily lives.
- We provide information and support, campaign to improve policy and attitudes and, in partnership with independent local Mind associations, develop local services.
- We do all this to make it possible for people who experience mental distress to live full lives, and play their full part in society.

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: **0845 766 0163** Monday to Friday 9.15am to 5.15pm. Speech-impaired or Deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Textdirect, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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