



Psychotherapy & Counselling That Works

## THE CYCLE OF DEPRESSION

### Emotional Thinking & Our Two Brains

Emotional thinking is one of the main issues for many of our clients, but why is it so hard to think rationally when we are emotional?

Imagine for a moment that you have two brains which cannot work together: You have a thinking brain where you keep track of your finances, plan holidays, do mathematical sums, basically anything logistical, and you also have an emotional brain. And it's this brain that keeps us safe. So an example of this would be...Say you are walking along the pavement and a car comes round the corner a little too fast, starts to lose control and is heading for you. Well, by the time your thinking brain has thought about whether you should nip over that wall or perhaps run behind a tree you could have been run over! However, instead your emotional brain takes charge and reacts in an instance with no thought at all.

Now this is what happens to all of us - whenever our emotional levels rise, our thinking brain goes off line, because as we have said they cant work together.

Can you perhaps remember a time that you got angry? We've all done it at some point, said or done something in the heat of the moment that we have lived to regret. Anger is a powerful emotion and any strong emotion we are feeling raises our emotional levels, planting us firmly in our emotional brain. Since the two cannot work together, we are now really limiting the thinking brain. And in this emotional state our thoughts

become all or nothing, black and white thinking, because we cannot apply any logic to the thoughts.

Depression is a strong emotion in itself, so if you find yourself suffering with really negative thoughts and poor sleep, read on and find out what you can do to help yourself.

## The cycle of depression

There you were, going along in life doing just fine, and then maybe out of the blue something happened like the loss of a loved one, a redundancy or an accident, and in the heightened emotional state that follows you get caught up in emotional thoughts, which in turn stop you doing the things you used to enjoy. And you begin to find you talk to friends and family less and less. At this point you can begin to lose your sense of purpose and the meaning you have in your life, and it's having purpose and meaning that gets us out of bed everyday. In other words, 'purpose and meaning make suffering tolerable'. Perhaps you are not working, and now have way too much time on your hands to think. When anyone is feeling low or depressed our thoughts become very negative, and we become the victim of black and white, all or nothing thinking. That chattering voice in your head (your thoughts) begins to tell you, 'I'll never get another job, boyfriend, girlfriend, car, house', or whatever you may be worrying about at the time.

You may find that you are getting angry and up tight, or maybe the thoughts you are having are telling you that no one cares, which makes you withdraw from the people close to you even more. Sleep is difficult and even if you do sleep you are waking up tired. And this tiredness isn't like a physical tiredness or like you didn't quite get enough sleep, this tiredness is something different. You wake up feeling like all the motivation has been sucked out of you, with no enthusiasm to do anything, and feeling like this is just one more thing to worry about on top of what you were already worrying about. It's like being on an unforgiving hamster wheel, stuck in this same cycle day after day. The good news is, you can break the cycle once you know what's going on.

## Why am I so tired when I wake up?

The answer to this question lies with our dreaming. The function of dreaming is to deactivate any emotional stuff that has bothered us during the day which we haven't been able to act upon that's taking up room in our brains. But, we don't dream about every single emotionally arousing incident, like the argument with the neighbour or work colleague, nor do we dream about the great dinner we have just shared with our friends. We dream about the stuff that caused an emotional reaction that we didn't or couldn't act on or express it in some way. More concisely, we will only dream about emotionally arousing expectations which, unconsciously, our emotional brain is still anticipating. This is the 'expectation fulfilment theory of dreaming' for which Joe Griffin, one of the founders of Human Givens therapy, carried out groundbreaking research.

## Our unfulfilled desires

For example, we may be walking to work and catch the mouth watering smell of a bakery, but we dismiss it as we are on a health kick. So the desire to eat that delicious mouth watering food gets pushed away. Even though we may not think about this again the desire to eat that tasty food has awakened our emotional impulse to eat it, and this emotion stays in our nervous system, waiting to be fulfilled. We will refer to this as emotional arousal. We can experience many different emotional impulses on a daily basis that we don't act upon. Such as seeing someone in the street or on the train that you are really attracted to that causes a thought of sexual desire or being angry with your boss but unable to argue with them. These are all things that carry the expectation of pleasure, anger or another instinct that we couldn't act upon and so remain active in our nervous system. We dream about them metaphorically, so not a direct representation of the incident, and this discharges the arousal, enabling us to start the new day with a clean slate, feeling ready to navigate a world that is abundant with emotionally reactive experiences. You can check this out for yourself. If you remember your dreams you will quickly start to see the pattern of what you were doing or thinking the previous day.

## So why does this make me so tired?

People who suffer with depression spend an awful amount of time ruminating over the past, what someone said, didn't say, what they did, or should have done, the negative thoughts are constant and can, and often do, cause anxiety or anger. If we keep on running these thoughts over and over in our mind then we cannot discharge the emotional arousal during the day, so it has to be discharged in a dream. The more negative thinking we do, the more unfulfilled loops we create and the more we need to dream at night.

Now, dreaming requires huge amounts of energy, and the energy we use to dream is our motivational energy. For a healthy adult about 25% of dream sleep is normally enough to discharge any emotional arousal that's been caused during the day, But if a person is depressed, and especially if they have been signed off from work or are not currently doing much, then all the negative worrying raises the amount of REM (Rapid Eye Movement) dream sleep required to way beyond that 25%. So we end up dreaming earlier in the night which affects the amount of restorative slow wave sleep we get. And in the end we will just keep waking up during the night, straight out of a dream usually, because if we didn't we wouldn't be able to function at all the next day.

If you have suffered with depression then you'll know that this tiredness is something else, its not a feeling of not having quite enough sleep, or having had a hard physical day, this tiredness is in a different league, and it's this that impacts on our ability to carry on doing all the activities that we used to love. So we begin to withdraw from life and isolate ourselves, giving us more time to think more negative emotional thoughts raising our emotional arousal, creating more dreaming, making us more tired! And round we go again on that relentless hamster wheel...

## Sound familiar?

If this is sounding familiar, here are 8 things that you can do to help yourself.

*It should be noted that if you have suffered a traumatic experience (read more here), then you will probably need a little help to deal with the patterns that this has laid down, as this is likely to be a stumbling block in your recovery.*

## 8 things you can do yourself to help combat depression

### 1. Get some exercise

Exercise, if you are able. Yes we know that's the last thing you wish to do because of the tiredness, but we are not talking about running marathons here. Even if we get just twenty minutes a day, that would make a big difference. Exercise is one of the best things for us; it fires feel good endorphins into the brain that chemically reward us and makes us feel better; it also lowers our emotional level which means we are thinking clearer; there is less pressure on the dreaming function which means we begin to sleep better. And breaking that cycle of depression begins.

### 2. All important interaction

Get as much human interaction as possible, We are herd animals and we need to be around others. Visit or phone your nearest and dearest everyday, and at the very least take a walk down to the shops and chat to people there if you are able.

### 3. Clubs & Hobbies

Join a club if possible, There is a great website called [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com) that has thousands of different clubs and hobbies all started by people who are interested in a particular subject. You can search by area and the mile radius you are willing to travel to, or search for a specific interest. Being part of a club plugs us back into society and meets our basic emotional needs. These needs are a requirement to good mental health. See our emotional needs audit [here](#), and test yourself to see how you do. This will highlight any areas of your life that need attention.

### 4. A helpful breathing technique

Practice the 7/11 breathing technique. You can find this technique here. Do this as often as you can, trying to keep your attention on the numbers you count. This gives your hard-working emotional brain a holiday from all those negative thoughts, lowers our emotional levels and relaxes our bodies!

### 5. Hygiene

Keep on top of your personal hygiene as much as possible. Lacking in motivation, you might not feel like having a shower and putting on fresh clothes, but we promise you it will make a huge difference to the way that you feel. Well worth the effort.

### 6. Focus outwards

Keep your attention focused outwards. When we are talking to someone else and focused on them, or when we are at work concentrating on the job at hand, we have no time to listen to the chattering voice in our own heads, (our thoughts). This means we won't be listening to the negative rubbish it is telling us which is raising our emotional level. When we are truly focused on something or someone, we are present. And nearly all of the time life in the present moment is ok. Our negative thoughts pull us to towards the past or the future, rarely the present.

## 7. Daylight and Vitamin D

Get plenty of natural daylight, open the curtains and get outside, in nature if possible, as this can have a calming effect on us. Being outside, even on an overcast day, will top up vital levels of vitamin D. Boosting your vitamin D levels will help fight depression, bolster your immune system and fight fatigue and chronic tiredness.

Whilst you're outside, try to be as present and mindful as possible, as you will benefit from having some time away from your own thoughts.

Otherwise you may find that you went for a nice walk but didn't notice anything and simply brought your internal negative dialogue with you.

Notice colours, sounds and smells; notice the way you walk, being mindful of the steady rhythm of your footsteps.

## 8. Healthy living

Avoid known depressants like alcohol and caffeine, and eat as healthily as possible, as foods with lots of additives have a negative impact on us.

Tempting though it is to rely on junk food and stimulants, your effort will be rewarded if you cut back on these foods and drinks.

## Knowledge is power

Most people find it is immensely reassuring to have an understanding of the physical and emotional factors to depression and to know how much their thoughts can negatively impact on them. Remember that your brain is behaving exactly as it is meant to, and that by employing some of the above techniques you can have some power and control in how you move forward with your battle against depression.