Depression Self-care
The information of this section is selected, with approvals, from the Antidepressant Skills Workbook developed by Dr. Dan Bilsker and Dr. Randy Paterson (http://comh.ca/antidepressant-skills/adult/).

In this section, you will learn three skills that can stop your mood from sliding down, lessen your depression and help prevent it from happening again. The skills are:

1) Reactivating Your Life 2) Thinking Realistically 3) Solving Problems

We will explain how each of these skills helps fight depression and show you in a step-by-step way how to use the skill. It’s best to think about these skills the way you would if you were learning a new job or a new sport: practice is very important. Some people find it helpful to share this guide with a spouse, trusted friend, counsellor or family member – this person can help you keep practicing even when you feel low energy or unmotivated. If there’s no one like that, then keep practicing the antidepressant skills. As you work through the skills, it will gradually get easier and the result is worth it.

Depression involves all areas of your life: your emotions, thoughts, actions, physical functioning, and life situation (including social support, family relationships, employment, finances, and so on). Each of these areas is connected to all the others. As a result, changes in one area produce changes in the others. When depression first develops, negative changes in one cause the others to get worse as well. But when you are working on getting better, changing one area leads to improvements in the others. The goal of treatment is to get all areas of your life spiraling upward, each producing positive change that improves the others.

1. Reactivating your Life
Depression leads to inactivity, but inactivity makes depression worse. What seems like a good coping strategy actually tends to maintain or intensify depression. The solution: don’t wait until you feel like doing more. Waiting actually makes it less likely that you will get better. And don’t wait until you feel motivated – as you get better, you will regain a sense of motivation. Action starts first, motivation kicks in later. Setting goals to increase your activity level is a powerful method for managing depression. The aim is to gradually get yourself moving even though you might not feel like it. These are the steps to gradually reactivating your life.

Step 1: Identify activities to increase
There are four main areas in which depressed people often reduce their activity. These are: Involvement with Family & Friends; Personally Rewarding Activities; Self-Care; and Small Duties.

In order to identify some goals to work on, take a moment to consider each of these areas. List some activities in each area that have been affected by depression (or that had been neglected even before the depression began) and that could be increased.

Personally Rewarding Activities Examples:

Increasing your activity in this area will make a difference because:
1. it reminds you of your own interests, the things that are important to you
2. it provides you with badly-needed rewards as your depression starts to lift

Self-Care Examples:
Getting dressed each day. Taking time to shower and get cleaned up. Exercising. Eating breakfast. Eating more nutritious food. (Lifestyle factors associated with reducing depression are discussed in the information sheets at the back of the book.)

Increasing your activity in this area will make a difference because:
1. it will directly enhance your sense of physical well-being
2. it helps remind you that you are a competent person

Small Duties Examples:

Increasing your activity in this area will make a difference because:
1. it increases your sense of control
2. it reduces tension with others as you begin to take on a share of the work

Involvement with family and friends Examples:
Inviting people to do things. Keeping in contact with people where you used to live. Returning phone calls. Getting out to a social group or class.
Increasing your activity in this area will make a difference because:
1. it will help you regain a sense of being connected to others
2. it gives other people the chance to provide reassurance and support
3. it takes you away from being alone and thinking depressing thoughts

Step 2: Choose two of these activities
Pick two activities that are most practical for you to begin changing now. Your first two choices should be from different areas.

Step 3: Set realistic goals
For each of the activities you have chosen, set a manageable goal for the coming week. Keep in mind that depression makes it difficult to get moving. As a result, you need to set your goals much lower than you ordinarily would. For example, if you would like to start riding a bicycle again, your first goal might be to find your bicycle and see whether it needs any repairs. If you would like to get the house cleaned up, your first goal might be to vacuum one room, or dust one shelf. If you want to socialize with people again, your first goal might be to talk to one friend on the telephone for five minutes To succeed, your goals must be: Specific (Depression can make almost anything seem like a failure. You need to have a very clear idea of your goal so that you will know you have succeeded.) Realistic (You may find it tempting to set your goals based on how much you think you should be able to accomplish. Don’t. Keep in mind that depression slows you down and makes things more difficult. Your goals should be easy enough to be achievable even if you feel very depressed in the coming week. Sometimes it seems overwhelming to think of starting a new activity. In that case, try setting the goal of gathering information related to the activity: for example, finding out what sorts of exercise activities are available in your local community centre.) Scheduled (You should have a clear idea when and how you are going to carry out your activation goal. “Take a walk Thursday evening for 15 minutes” is much better than “Walk more.”)

Here is an example: Frank started with two goals: slightly increasing his level of physical activity (from none to one short walk each week) and increasing his level of social activity (from none to going out with his wife and daughter every two weeks). He used his appointment book to write in each of these activities. After he did each activity, he checked it off in his book.
Try setting some goals that would be realistic to do this week. Decide how often or for how long you will do the activity, and when you will do it. Now write your goals:
Think of your activity goals as appointments with yourself. Treat these goals as respectfully as you would an appointment with your physician. If you must cancel one of these appointments with yourself, reschedule immediately and don’t miss it. Note: Don’t give yourself extra credit for doing more than the goal you set for yourself. If you do more, that’s fine, but that doesn’t allow you to miss the next appointment. If you let that kind of trade-off happen, your goals will soon be neglected.

Step 4: Carry out your goals
It’s important to realize that you probably won’t “feel like” doing your activity goals. In depression, your motivation to do things is much less than usual. But if you wait until you feel like it, most likely nothing will happen. Do the activity because you set a goal for yourself and
because it will help you get better. After you’ve done and checked off each goal, you will see what you’ve accomplished.

In the early stages of recovering from depression, it’s likely that you won’t get much enjoyment from your activities, but as you continue to increase your activity level and focus on recovery, you will gradually regain the ability to enjoy activities. You’ll even regain the ability to motivate yourself!

If you completed a goal, did you congratulate yourself? If not, do so now. Depression is likely to make you focus on the things you haven’t done, and ignore or downplay your accomplishments. This keeps the depression going, because you will constantly feel like a failure. Deliberately remind yourself of achievements, no matter how small they may seem. “All right, I planned to walk around the block and I did it. Good.” Don’t ignore small victories or think they don’t count. They do, especially during depression. If you find yourself minimizing your own achievement (“but that was such a small thing to do”), remember that completing small goals while depressed is like walking a short distance with a very heavy pack. Meeting goals while depressed is challenging and deserves to be recognized.

If you didn’t succeed, what got in the way? What can you do to make the goal easier? Recognize that your goal may have been too ambitious. Try making it smaller for next week, or substitute a different goal. Depressed people often set their goals too high, fail to reach them, and become discouraged. The problem is not that they are lazy, but that they are too eager to get well! Scale back to something you are sure you can do, even if you feel no better this week than you did last week. Washing one dish, making one phone call, opening one bill, walking around one block, or spending five minutes at a hobby: these are all perfectly reasonable goals. As your energy comes back you will be able to do more. But for now, allow yourself to get started slowly.

Step 5: Review your goals

After two weeks of doing these goals, review the situation.

- Do you want to increase the goals slightly or keep doing them at the same level until it feels pretty comfortable? It’s your choice.
- This is a good time to add another goal. Pick one from another area. For example, if you had Self-Care and Personally Rewarding Activities goals before, choose one from Involvement with Family & Friends or from Small Duties.

Write the new goal into your schedule along with the 2 continuing goals. Remember, check off the activity goal as you do it and praise yourself for completing it. After two weeks of doing these goals, review the situation again. Are there any goals that were not getting done? What got in the way? Do you need to reduce or change the goal?

Keep going! Continue to set your ongoing goals, and consider adding additional goals as your energy permits. If you complete a task (for example, if you have now finished gathering information about recreational activities in your community), then move on to a new goal.

Keep using the procedure:

- Set your 3 goals.
- Write them in your schedule.
- Check off each goal as you do it.
- Praise yourself each time.
- Review the goals every two weeks to decide if they need modification and whether you are ready to add a new goal.

Eventually, you’ll be working on 3-4 goals at a time or maybe more. Don’t get carried away, though: having too many goals can get overwhelming.
2. Thinking realistically
Depressive thinking is unrealistic and unfair:

- unrealistic, negative thoughts about your situation;
- unrealistic and unfair, negative thoughts about yourself;
- unrealistic, negative thoughts about your future.

The aim is to challenge depressive thinking and replace it with realistic thinking.

Realistic thinking is:

- accurate about your situation, seeing things clearly as they are;
- fair about yourself, looking in a balanced way at the positive and negatives in your life;
- accurate about your future, not exaggerating bad outcomes.

That means being fair and realistic about yourself (paying attention to good qualities and strengths as well as problems), about your current situation (weighing the positive and negative aspects of your life accurately) and about your future (not exaggerating the likelihood of very negative outcomes). So, how do you change depressive thinking?

Step 1: Learn to identify depressive thoughts
Depressive thoughts are unfair and unrealistic. They are distorted because they are inaccurate reflections of how the world is or how you are. The table below describes some common forms of distorted thinking in depression:

- **Filtering.** In this kind of depressive thinking, you only look at the bad, never the good. Because all you see is the negative side, your whole life appears to be negative. But realistic thinking equally considers positive and negative aspects of your life.

- **Overgeneralization.** In this kind of depressive thinking, one negative event seems like the start of a never-ending pattern. If one friend leaves, they all will. If you fail the first time, you’ll fail every time. But realistic thinking recognizes that one disappointing situation does not determine how other situations will turn out.

- **All or Nothing Thinking.** You see the world in terms of extremes. You are either fat or thin, smart or stupid, tidy or a slob, depressed or joyful, and so on. There is no in-between. Gradual progress is never enough because only a complete change will do. “Who cares that I did half of it? It’s still not finished!” But realistic thinking sees people and events as falling somewhere between the extremes, towards the middle, where most things are found.

- **Catastrophizing.** A small disappointment is seen as though it were a disaster. For example, you were slightly late in completing a small project, so your entire month is ruined: you react to the imagined catastrophe (a terrible month) rather than to the little event (a late project). But realistic thinking sees events in their true importance, not overemphasizing negative events.

- **Labeling.** You talk to yourself in a harsh way, calling yourself names like “idiot”, “loser”, or whatever the worst insults are for you. You talk to yourself in a way you would never talk to anyone else. But realistic thinking doesn’t use these kind of insults because they are not fair, you wouldn’t talk to anyone else that way, and they are unnecessarily discouraging.

- **Mind-reading.** You feel as though you know what others are thinking about you, and it’s always negative. So you react to what you imagine they think, without bothering to ask. But realistic thinking recognizes that guessing what others think about you is likely to be inaccurate, especially when you are depressed.

- **Fortune-telling.** You feel as though you know what the future will bring, and it’s negative. Nothing will work out, so why bother trying? But realistic thinking recognizes that you don’t know how things will turn out: by staying open to the possibility of positive results, you’ll be more hopeful and more likely to make things better.
• **Perfectionism.** It’s only good enough if it’s perfect. And because you can’t make most things perfect, you’re rarely satisfied and can rarely take pride in anything. But realistic thinking gives credit for accomplishments, even if the result is less than perfect. Few of us reach perfection in what we do, but our achievements are meaningful.

• **Shoulds.** You think that you know how the world should be, and it isn’t like that. You know what you should be like, and you aren’t. Result: You are constantly disappointed and angry with yourself and with everyone around you. But realistic thinking understands the limitations of the world and of yourself — trying for improvement but also accepting how things are.

There are other types of depressive thinking, but these are some of the most common ones. When you catch yourself thinking depressively, it can be useful to look at this list to see if you are using one of them.

**Step 2:** Recognize your own depressive thoughts and how they trigger low mood.

Most thinking is so quick and so automatic that we don’t even realize we are doing it. We must learn to become aware of depressive thinking as it occurs. An excellent strategy is to carry around pencil and paper for a week.

Although depression can seem like a constant dark cloud, it actually varies over the course of the day. Every time your mood sinks, ask yourself this important question: “What was going through my mind just then?”

What were you thinking about? What were you reacting to? Write this down. For example, perhaps getting on the bus one morning you suddenly felt a deepening of the gloom you’ve been feeling. What was going through your mind just then? Perhaps you noticed that everyone on the bus was facing you, and you had the thought that they were judging you negatively. Excellent! Write it down.

Keep recording your thoughts until you notice that the same kinds of depressive thinking come up again and again. You might find yourself placing a checkmark beside some of the thoughts you wrote down earlier. “Oh, that one again.” When this happens, you have probably identified the most common kinds of depressive thinking you do.

Then what? Some of your depressive thoughts may seem obviously distorted. “Wait, the reason they were facing me on the bus is that I was at the front, not because they wanted to look at what a loser I am!” It can sometimes be enough just to know that your mind generates depressive thinking in certain kinds of situations. Try to become aware of the depressive thinking as it happens and remind yourself where it comes from. “I think this way because my mood is low and because I was a self conscious kid – not because they were all judging me.”

You may find that you take the depressive thoughts less seriously once you know where they come from. When you become aware of depressive thoughts you may feel tempted to attack yourself. “How could I think such stupid thoughts?” Depression causes you to be self-critical, and recognizing depressive thinking can give you one more way to beat up on yourself. Don’t. Instead, remind yourself that depressive thoughts are the product of low mood and of your personal history. You are not stupid for having them. They are normal during depression.

**Step 3:** Learn to challenge these depressive thoughts and replace them with fair and realistic ones.

Challenging depressive thoughts involves deliberately rethinking the situation that got you upset. To do think you can use a strategy called Challenging Depressive Thoughts. Take a piece of paper and divide it into columns.

First, make a brief note of the situation. Some examples: “Talking to daughter,” “Walking to work,” “Planning to make dinner.” Next, write down the negative thoughts that seem related to how you feel. If you like, you can try to classify the type of distortion involved (as shown above).

Finally, think about the situation and try to come up with a more fair and realistic assessment of the situation.
Situation: *Friend cancels lunch date.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEPRESSIVE THOUGHT</th>
<th>REALISTIC THOUGHT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>She doesn’t like me. <em>(Mind-reading)</em></td>
<td>I don’t know why she cancelled; maybe something urgent came up. It’s only lunch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one likes me. I’m unlikable. <em>(Overgeneralization)</em></td>
<td>Some people do seem to like me, so I must be likable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The world is a cold and rejecting place. <em>(Catastrophizing)</em></td>
<td>This lunch doesn’t mean much about the world as a whole. I’ve been accepted before.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ll always be alone. <em>(Fortune-Telling)</em></td>
<td>I can’t tell the future. One lunch doesn’t mean no one will ever like me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hint: Depressive thinking often goes way beyond the facts. Often the fair and realistic thought is simply to remind yourself that you don’t have enough information to know for certain what’s happening. “I don’t know why she cancelled lunch; there might be hundreds of possible reasons.” Calling yourself insulting names like “idiot” will cause you to feel more discouraged; as a result, you may give up on a task. But giving yourself encouragement and fair evaluation is likely to result in trying harder, which increases the odds of a successful outcome.

When you’re down or depressed, it’s not easy to come up with fair and realistic thoughts. Here are some questions that will help you do this.

- Can I get more evidence, like asking someone about the situation?
- Would most people agree with this thought? If not, what would be a more realistic thought?
- We are often much more realistic about other people than about ourselves.
- What would I say to a friend in a similar situation?
- What will happen if I continue to think this way?
- What is another way of thinking that is more encouraging or useful?

Now use these questions to come up with more realistic ways of thinking about a situation that upset you. Notice that it usually feels better to think realistic thoughts than depressive thoughts.

**Step 4: Practice realistic thinking.**

It’s not enough to come up with a fair and realistic thought just once. Depressive thinking gets repeated over and over, sometimes for years, until it becomes automatic. More balanced thinking will help you to feel better, but it won’t be automatic – at least not for a while. The good news is that changing depressive thinking doesn’t take years: in fact, depressed people often begin to notice emotional differences after only a few weeks of practicing this antidepressant skill.

Certain kinds of situations can really trigger depressive thinking. Situations likely to trigger depressive thinking might include meeting with your boss, attending a social gathering with people you don’t know well, or having a disagreement with a family member. In order to get the greatest benefit from this approach, you must catch yourself in situations that normally trigger depressive thoughts for you.

When you find yourself in these situations, deliberately rehearse your fair and realistic thinking. Don’t assume that it will happen on its own. You will have to tell yourself how to look at the situation, just as you might give advice or encouragement to a friend. Talk back to the depressive thinking. Don’t allow depressive thinking to happen without replying to it. Every time you talk back, you make the depressive thinking weaker and the realistic thinking stronger. But it takes time before realistic thoughts have more influence over you than depressive ones.

You will probably find that, for the first while, the realistic thinking sounds false to you. For example: you’ve been thinking in a perfectionistic way about your work, telling yourself that “my work has to be 100% or else it’s worthless,” but you are given very little time to complete each task, so you often feel
like a failure. You realize that this is unrealistic thinking and come up with the fair and realistic thought that “achieving 80% is acceptable in this job, given the time I have; that’s all anyone else accomplishes.” At first, this realistic thought will seem false, as though you are just fooling yourself. Only with time and repetition does realistic thinking – the truth – begin to feel true to you. Eventually you will come to accept realistic thoughts.

3. **Solving problems**
Depression is often the result of life problems that have become overwhelming. The strategies for solving them have been ineffective, or may even have made them worse. Why is it that as people get depressed, their ability to solve problems declines? There are several reasons:
- Solving problems takes energy. As depression worsens, the energy level declines.
- Everyday problems take a backseat to a bigger problem – the depression itself. Because the person becomes so concerned about the mood problem, other problems slide and get worse.
- Depression causes difficulties in concentration, memory, decision-making ability, and creativity. Most problem-solving requires all of these skills.

Given all of these factors, it is no great surprise that problems don’t get solved and instead pile up. What can be done? First, recognize that your problem-solving ability may not be as good as it usually is. Don’t beat yourself up over this. It is a normal symptom of depression, and it does get better. Then sit down and follow these next steps...

**Step 1: Choose a problem**
The first step in problem solving is to choose a problem. Sometimes, depressed individuals have difficulty identifying specific problems in their lives – they see everything as one huge problem. For them, identifying particular problems worth tackling is quite helpful. It brings them closer to finding realistic answers.

One way to identify problems is to pay close attention to how your mood changes through the week. Notice what’s happening when your mood goes down: what were you thinking about; where were you; and what happened just before your mood changed? Changes in your mood can be a helpful guide to show you where the problems are.

Some of your problems might be large ones (for example, “I have an eviction notice that comes up next week”) while some are small (“I’m going to need carrots if I want to make that salad tonight”). Other problems are somewhere in between (“There’s a pile of mail on my desk that I haven’t had the courage to look at in over a week”).

Choose one of the smaller problems that is happening now. Later, you can move up to larger problems. Try to be specific. For example, “My relationships are a mess” isn’t specific: it’s not clear what the problem is. “My best friend hasn’t called me in a month” is more specific and makes it clear what is going wrong and what you want to change.

**Step 2: Think of actions to help solve the problem**
Write down three things you could do to help solve the problem. Consider things you can do that don’t depend on somebody else. Don’t try to decide which one is best: just come up with different actions you might carry out. Don’t worry if you tried something before and it didn’t work – situations change. And don’t worry whether the actions will solve the problem completely – your aim now is to be doing something useful, not to fix the whole problem.

**Here is an example:**
It was done by Amy, employed as executive secretary to a senior manager.

*The Problem:*
My workload is overwhelming – files are piling up in my tray and, even though I work long hours, I keep getting further behind. I’ve told my boss that the workload has been growing quickly, but she doesn’t do anything about it. The whole situation seems out of control and I’m starting to feel pretty depressed.

Possible Actions:
1. Just keep going, maybe my boss will notice how overloaded I am and she will get another employee to take over some of the work.
2. March in to my boss’s office and let her know that I’ve had enough, ask her to stop making unreasonable requests.
3. Write down all the jobs that are on my desk, then note which ones are urgent to do today, and which ones need to be done this week, this month or this century. That way, I’ll be focusing my energy on the highest priority tasks and I can plan ahead a little more effectively.

Step 3: Compare these actions
Consider which of these actions are most likely to help the problem. Look at the advantages and disadvantages of each one.

This is what Amy wrote:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Just keep going</td>
<td>• It’s what I’m used to doing</td>
<td>• It will probably keep getting worse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I won’t get into conflict</td>
<td>• I’ll become even more depressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• If I fall behind much more, I could get into big trouble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Let my boss know that</td>
<td>• I’ll be speaking my mind</td>
<td>• I don’t enjoy confronting people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• My boss might fix the situation</td>
<td>• My boss might get angry with me for being so direct, and this might become a new problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Prioritize my jobs</td>
<td>• I can catch up with the urgent jobs</td>
<td>• I’ll still need to deal with the workload problem at some point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• That would take some pressure off so I can look for other solutions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I would feel more in control of the situation, that would help my mood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Step 4: Pick the best one
Look over the advantages and disadvantages for each action and decide which one is best (or perhaps least bad). There are no fixed rules for how to make this choice: the only rule is that one of the actions must be chosen so that you can begin. Look over the possibilities, think about the good and bad points of each, then just pick one. It should be an action that takes you at least partway towards a solution. Give yourself a limited time to make this decision so it doesn’t drag on. Remember, if you start to move in one direction and discover that it really doesn’t work, you can try another action. Amy, the overworked secretary, chose her third action, prioritizing her jobs so she could focus on the most urgent ones.

Step 5: Make an action plan
There aren’t very many problems that you will solve completely with just one action. But there might be many actions that will take you partway toward a solution. If you have a financial problem, for example, then perhaps your first action should be to gather the paperwork together so that you can look at it. Just gathering the paper won’t solve the problem, but it will take you closer to a solution than you were before. The important thing is to get started on a solution.

Your plan of action should follow four rules:
• Manageable. Even if you don’t feel any better in the coming week than you did last week (even if you feel a little worse), you could do it anyway. It’s better to accomplish a goal that is too small than to fail at an ambitious one. Here’s a bad example: For my first time out, run a marathon. Better example: Walk one block.
• Action-oriented. Make a plan for what you will do, not how you will think or feel while you are doing it. You have a certain amount of control over what you do, but you have less control over your emotions and thoughts. Bad example: Spend a pleasant hour with my children. Better example: Spend one hour with my children.
• Specific. It should be very clear what you need to do. Bad example: Get in shape. Better example: Phone the community centre to find out whether they teach yoga.
• Time-limited. Your plan should take only a short time to carry out. Don’t plan to change your style forever. Bad example: Keep up regular exercise for the rest of my life. Better example: Walk 20 minutes three times a week, review after two months.

**Step 6: Evaluate**
Come back to this section when a week has passed or when you have achieved your goal.
What was the outcome? What went right? What went wrong?
Depressed mood will tempt you to dwell on failures and on the things you haven’t done, rather than to congratulate yourself on any progress you have made. If you succeeded at your goal, deliberately make yourself think about that success (even though the problem still hasn’t been solved).

**Step 7: Move On**
Use this experience to plan your next step.
You have three main options:
*Keep going.* Example: Spend another 20 minutes finding the papers.
*Revise your goal and try again.* Example: Cleaning the garage for one hour was too difficult, so plan to work on it for just 10 minutes instead.
*Take a new approach.* Perhaps you learned something useful from your first effort that suggests another way of handling the issue. Example: Talking face to face with Aunt Sarah didn’t work, so write her a letter instead.

Keep working on this issue in a step-by-step manner. Record your efforts on paper. Keep reminding yourself about the progress you make.