

Summary of Session 7: How Can I Best Take Care of Myself?

What we actually *do* with our time, from moment to moment, from hour to hour, from one year to the next, can very powerfully influence our general well-being and our ability to deal skilfully with depression.

You might like to try asking yourself these questions:

1. Of the things that I do, what **nourishes** me? What lifts my mood, energises me, makes me feel calm and centred? What increases my sense of actually being alive and present, rather than merely existing? (**'N'** activities)
2. Of the things that I do, what **depletes** me? What pulls me down, drains my energy, makes me feel tense and fragmented? What decreases my sense of actually being alive and present, what makes me feel I am merely existing, or worse? (**'D'** activities)
3. Accepting that there are some aspects of my life that I simply cannot change, how can I increase the time and effort I give to **'N'** activities and decrease the time and effort I give to **'D'** activities?
4. And could I learn to approach **'D'** activities in a different way? To practise being fully present with them, even if I find them boring or unpleasant – to bring 'raisin mind' to them instead of judging them or wishing that they were not there?

By being present in more of our moments, and making mindful decisions about what we really need at each of those moments, we can use activity to become more aware and alert, and to regulate mood.

This is true both for the regular pattern of our daily lives, and for dealing with periods of low mood that may lead on to depression - we can use our day-by-day experience to discover and cultivate activities that will help us to care for ourselves in periods of worsening mood. Having these already available means that we will be more likely to persist with them in the face of negative thoughts such as "Why bother with anything?" that are simply part of the territory of feeling depressed.

For example, one of the simplest ways to take care of your physical and mental well-being is to take daily physical exercise. As a minimum, aim for at least one brisk 10 minute walk a day - and also, if at all possible, other types of exercise such as mindful stretching, yoga, swimming, jogging, etc. Once exercise is part of your daily routine, it is readily available as a way of responding to depressed moods as they arise.

Using the Breathing Space: The Action Step

The Breathing Space provides a way to remind us to use activity to deal with unpleasant feelings as they arise.

After reconnecting with an expanded awareness in the breathing space, it may feel appropriate to take some *considered action*. In dealing with depressed feelings, the following activities may be particularly helpful:

1. Do something pleasurable.
2. Do something that will give you a sense of satisfaction or mastery.
3. Act mindfully.

Ask yourself: What do I need for myself right now? How can I best take care of myself right now?

Try some of the following:

1. Doing Something Pleasurable

Be Kind to Your Body

Have a nice hot bath; have a nap; treat yourself to your favourite food; have your favourite hot drink.

Engage in Enjoyable Activities

Go for a walk (maybe with the dog or a friend); visit a friend; do your favourite hobby; do some gardening; take some exercise; phone a friend; spend time with someone you like; cook a meal; go shopping; watch something funny or uplifting on TV; read something that gives you pleasure; listen to music that makes you feel good

Be aware of barriers to pleasure

Be aware of 'killjoy thoughts' that tell you won't enjoy a pleasure you have planned, that you don't deserve it, that you should be enjoying it more, thoughts that distract you from fully experiencing what you are doing.

2. Doing Something That Gives You a Sense of Mastery or Satisfaction ("taking care of business")

Clean the house; clear out a cupboard or drawer; catch up with letter writing; do some work; pay a bill; do something that you have been putting off doing.

Be aware of high standards and “it should be different” thinking

They may make it hard for you to feel you have achieved anything worthwhile. Notice thoughts like “I should be doing this better/faster/more easily”, recognise them for what they are, and let them be.

Things that are normally easy can be very difficult when mood is low. So give yourself the credit you would give another person struggling with a difficult task. It may well be helpful to *break tasks down into smaller steps and only tackle one step at a time*. Make sure you treat yourself kindly and with respect, and congratulate yourself whenever you complete a task or a part of a task.

3. Acting Mindfully

When mood is low, our minds tend to be preoccupied with worries and ruminations. We may be going over and over things that have happened in the past, trying to make sense of why we feel the way we do, or anxiously wondering about the future. The end result is that our attention is not really on what we are doing – we are lost in our heads, rather than focussed on what is happening right here and now. This means that activities that might nourish us become depleting.

Notice if your mind has been hijacked by negative thoughts that tend to take you away from being present. Instead, have an intention to focus your entire attention on what you are doing right now. Keep yourself in the very moment you are in; put your mind in the present (e.g. “Now I am walking down the stairs...now I can feel the banister beneath my hand...now I'm walking into the kitchen...now I'm turning on the light...”). Be aware of your breathing as you do other things; be aware of the contact of your foot with the floor as you walk.

The more powerful your thoughts, the more difficult this may be. But, with practice, you will find that your capacity to be more fully present in each moment will grow.

Remember***Be open-minded***

Whatever you choose to do, perform your action as an experiment. Don't pre-judge how you will feel after it is completed. Keep an open mind about whether doing this will be helpful in any way.

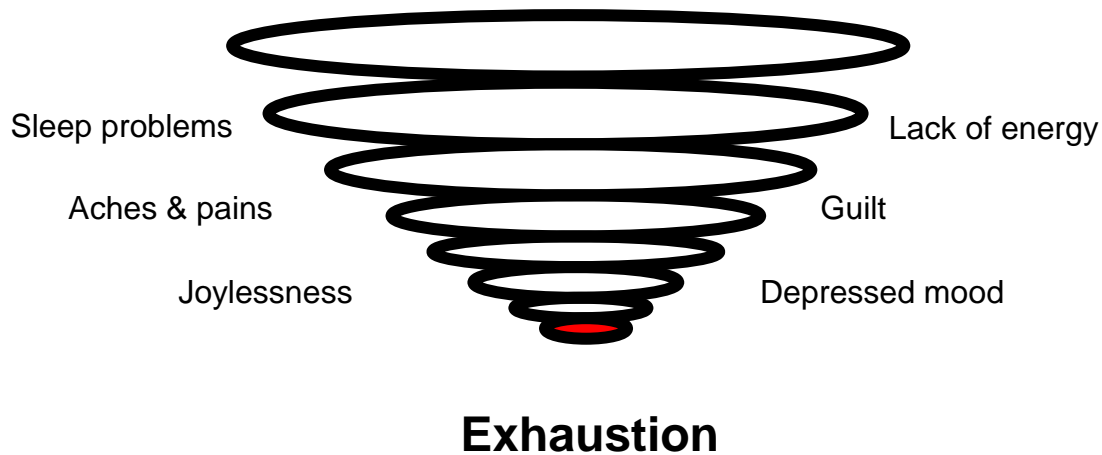
Aim for a broad range

Consider a range of activities and don't limit yourself to a favourite few. Sometimes trying new behaviours can be interesting in itself. 'Exploring' and 'enquiring' often works against 'withdrawal' and 'retreat'.

Don't expect miracles

Carry out what you have planned to do as best you can. Putting extra pressure on yourself by expecting a single activity to alter things dramatically may be unrealistic. Even a 1% change in your pattern of activities, increasing those that nourish you and decreasing those that deplete you, is helpful in building your overall sense of control in the face of shifts in your mood.

The Exhaustion Funnel



The Exhaustion Funnel

The 'exhaustion funnel' illustrates a process that can follow when our mood goes down and we feel depleted. The narrowing area of the circles illustrates the narrowing of our lives as we follow the tendency to give up the things in life that we enjoy but that seem 'optional'. The result is that we stop doing activities that would nourish us, leaving only work or other stressors that often deplete our resources.

Professor Marie Asberg suggests that those of us who continue downwards are likely to be those who are most conscientious, or those whose self-confidence is closely dependent on their performance, i.e. those who are often seen as the *most* hard-working.

The diagram also shows the sequence of accumulating 'symptoms' that may be experienced, as the funnel narrows and we become more and more exhausted.

Common Thoughts that might get in the way of Skilful Action

- I'm tired now so I'll feel tired for the rest of the day
- Other people's needs are more important than mine
- There's no point starting this unless I can finish it
- I should always do things really well
- Everyone else would do this activity better than I'm doing it
- I'm not the person I was
- It's better not to talk to anyone about how I'm feeling, it might upset them
- I should be able to cope with this
- I can't do this as well as I used to
- How am I going to get everything done, I've got so much to do

Now feel free to add some of your own.....

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The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean ---
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down -
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Mary Oliver
"House of Light."
Beacon Press, Boston.

Home practice following session 7

Audio: Your choice

- **Select** from all the different forms of practice, a pattern you intend to use in your daily life – **a practice** that is *realistic* to make part of your regular, daily routine...better little and often than saving it up for 'mega' practice.
- **Regular Breathing Space** 3 times a day.
- **Responsive Breathing Space** whenever you notice unpleasant feelings.

Complete the 'Practice Record Form' each time you do any of the practices. Make a note of anything that you notice.

Practice Record Form

Name:.....

Record on this form each time you practice. Also, make a note of anything that comes up in the practice, so that we can talk about it at the next meeting.

Day / date	Practice (Yes / No)	Comments
Date:	Chosen Practice(s): BS: 1 2 3 Responsive BS:	
Date:	Chosen Practice(s): BS: 1 2 3 Responsive BS:	
Date:	Chosen Practice(s): BS: 1 2 3 Responsive BS:	
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