

## Coping with Depression after a Spinal Cord Injury

This leaflet gives a brief overview of low mood and depression and some tips to help with managing it. If you would like support with managing your mood while at NSIC, please ask one of your treating team to refer you to the Psychology Department.

**IMPORTANT: Experiencing depression is not unusual, but neither is it an inevitable experience following SCI.**

### What is Depression?

Feeling sad, hopeless, low in mood or depressed are natural reactions to traumatic or life changing events such as a spinal cord injury (SCI). It is common for people to struggle with their mood or find it difficult to cope following their injury. You may find that the approaches you previously used to manage your mood are harder to implement, or not as effective as they were before. Feeling low in mood not only affects how you feel emotionally but can influence how you feel physically, how you think and act, and how you relate to others. Depression happens when these feelings persist and it becomes harder and harder to escape from them, often leading to a downward spiral. Depression is a common problem which can occur in all kinds of people: about 12% of people experience depression at some stage in their life.

Some common symptoms of depression include:

- Persistent low mood.
- Not feeling any enjoyment in life.
- Feelings of hopelessness.
- Crying more often than usual.
- Feeling numb.
- Feeling tired and lacking in energy.
- Difficulties with sleep or sleeping more than usual.
- Difficulties with concentration.
- Changes in appetite, such as eating less, eating more or comfort eating.
- Thoughts of being better off dead or thoughts of harming yourself.

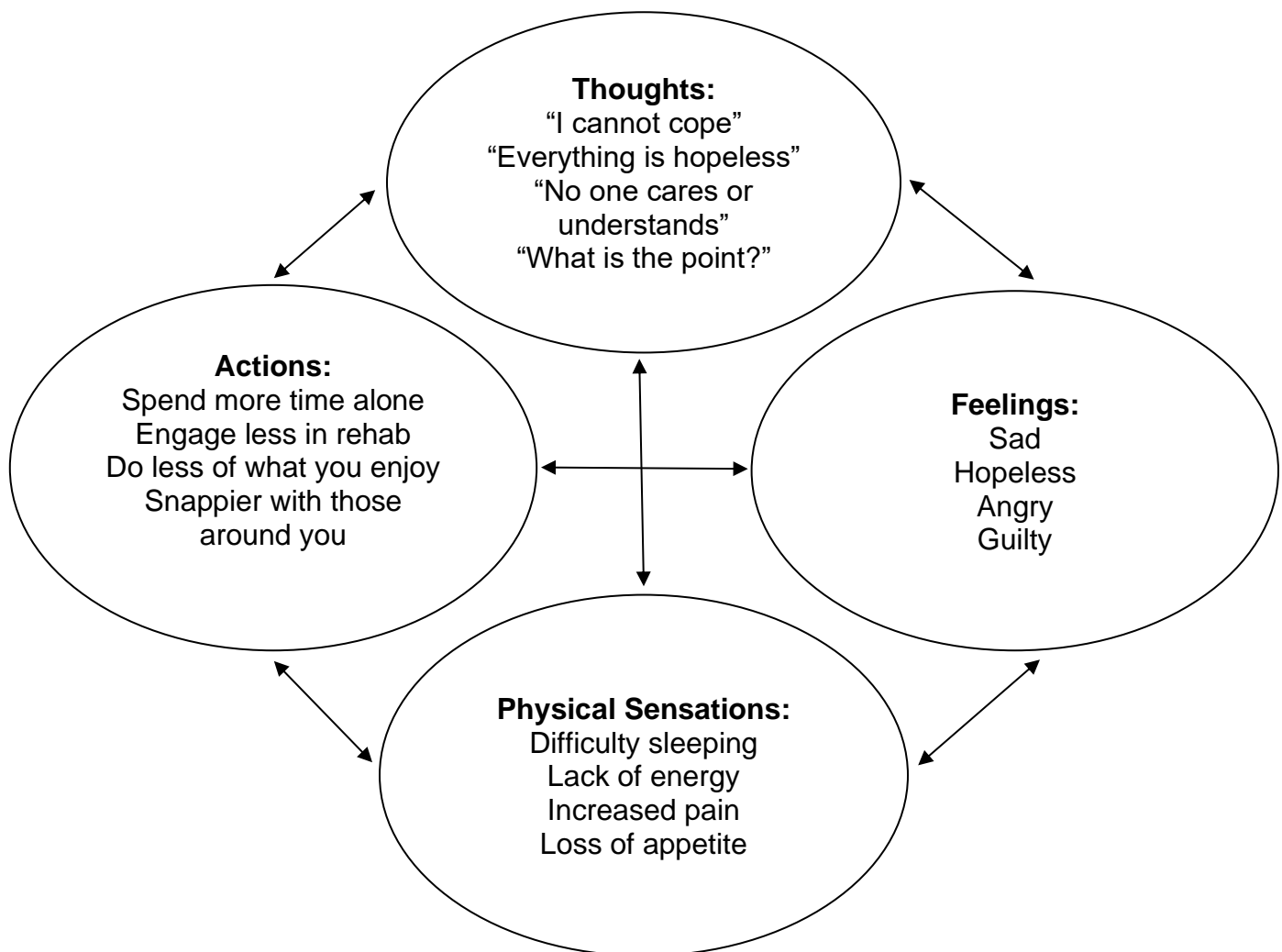


Some of these symptoms may also be associated with physical changes following your spinal cord injury. It can be helpful to notice how the way you are feeling physically can interact with how you think, feel and act.

## What Keeps Depression Going?

Depression is maintained when a vicious cycle develops between how someone thinks, how they feel and what they do. These cycles can be very difficult to escape from. Feeling depressed can slow someone down so that everything becomes an effort; the person may tire easily, do less, and therefore feel worse. When someone has depression, their thinking tends to become more negative. They might interpret situations as worse than they are and may come to believe that things will never get better for them or that nothing can be done to help their situation. These feelings of hopelessness are one of the key features of depression. It is particularly important to notice them as they can often prevent people from seeking help for their depression and can, in some people, lead to thoughts of suicide or self-harm.

The cycle below is an example of a vicious cycle which could develop for someone who is experiencing depression following their spinal cord injury:



## How can Depression be Overcome?

Fortunately, there are strategies which can be learnt which can help you to overcome depression. In reading this leaflet, you have taken the first step towards understanding and managing your mood.

The Clinical Psychology Department can offer a confidential space to discuss and assess your concerns and offer specific techniques to help you overcome your depression. If you would like to speak to one of the psychology team, please ask one of your treating team to make a referral. We will usually be able to see you within a few weeks of your referral. You can find out more about the psychology team in the “Introducing the Psychology Team working in the NSIC” leaflet. We are also able to talk to you about support for managing depression after you are discharged from the NSIC.

Below are some things you can try to help manage your mood. Some of these you may feel able to try yourself, some you may need the support of others around you such as family or friends, or you may require the support of a psychological professional. The psychology team can help if you are struggling with any of these.

### Tips for managing your mood:

- *Increase activity levels* – this can help to break the cycle of depression and provide an opportunity for your mood to improve. Any type of activity counts and could include:
  - Spending time talking to friends and family, or other patients.
  - Reading or listening to music
  - Going to the garden, a café or the shops.
  - Engaging in physical activity such as exercises agreed with your physio.
- *Notice negative thoughts* – especially those which might get in the way of doing things.
- *Observe your thoughts* - picture them like leaves on a stream or clouds in the sky, passing you by without a need to engage with them.
- *Question your thoughts* - you might find it helpful to gently question your thoughts. Some of the questions below might help to identify alternative ways of thinking:
  - Is there another way of looking at this?
  - What evidence do I have for this thought?
  - What would I say to someone else in this situation?
  - What might one of my friends or family members say to me?
- *Be self-compassionate* – remind yourself that it is OK to feel low and it doesn't mean there is anything wrong with you, it might just be an indicator that you are going through a particularly difficult time. Take some time to do something to look after yourself.

**IMPORTANT:** *If you are an inpatient and you experience thoughts of self-harm, self-neglect or suicide, speak with a member of staff. If you are living at home, reach out to your GP or any healthcare professional involved in your care. You can also contact 111 or go to Accident & Emergency in a Hospital if you are having immediate thoughts of self-harm or suicide.*


## Summary

In this booklet we have explored what depression is, what keeps it going and suggested some ideas to help overcome it. These have focussed on changes to what you can do now and how you think.


If you are struggling to manage your depression while you are an inpatient at NSIC please ask for a referral to the Clinical Psychology Department or email [bht.nsicpsychology@nhs.net](mailto:bht.nsicpsychology@nhs.net). If you have been discharged and are struggling with depression, please ask your healthcare provider for a referral to a service that can provide psychological support..


## Additional Resources:

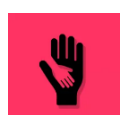
 **Samaritans:** A confidential listening service available 24/7. Call on 116 123 (freephone) or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org). <https://www.samaritans.org/>


 **Shout:** A free and confidential text service available 24/7 on 85258.


## Apps:

 **Self-help App for the Mind (SAM):** A free wellbeing app to help monitor and manage your mental health. It offers tools and strategies to track and manage thoughts and behaviours. It also has a confidential online community you can connect with.

 **Smiling Mind:** A free app for practicing meditation and mindfulness exercises.

 **What's Up? A Mental Health App:** A free app which uses Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to help manage depression, anxiety, anger and stress.

 **Headspace:** An app for learning mindfulness and meditation skills. It offers access to hundreds of guided meditations varying in length from as little as a few minutes. It offers a 14 day free trial and a paid for subscription after this.

 **Calm:** An app for managing stress and anxiety, Calm offers a range of guided meditations, sleep stories, breathing programs, and relaxing music. It has some free features but most is accessed through a subscription.

## How can I help reduce healthcare associated infections?

Infection prevention and control is important to the well-being of our patients and for that reason we have infection prevention and control procedures in place. Keeping your hands clean is an effective way of preventing the spread of infections. Please follow our infection prevention and control guidelines when visiting our healthcare sites. Further information is available on our website.

### Patient Advice Sheet

If you would like a copy of this information on audiotape, in large print or translated, please call the Patient Advice Liaison Service on 01296 831120 or email [bht.pals@nhs.net](mailto:bht.pals@nhs.net)

Please remember that this leaflet is intended as general information only. We aim to make the information as up to date and accurate as possible, but please note that it is subject to change. Please therefore always check specific advice on any concerns you may have with your doctor.