

## UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING DEPRESSION: 18 Practices for processing emotional suffering

Noel Haarbuerger, 2021

- 1. Re-frame it**– The first and most important step in managing depression is to see it as a 'message' or invitation to understand and know yourself more deeply. *Let go of fighting it, and instead listen to what it is telling you? Even be curious how you are actually contributing to it.*  
***It is not a symptom to be fixed, but an experience to be listened too!*** Can you look at your depression as a '**wake up**' call to tell us what is out of balance in our life, what we really value and want, what needs acceptance, healing and attention, and what needs haven't been well met, what needs to change, and or be surrendered too and accepted.  
*Depression has a purpose; it is not bad or a pathology. It is a **stop sign of the soul**, to make us listen to ourselves. It's not uncommon that **depression is a result of core emotions or a vulnerability you have refused to consciously relate too.** It is here to tell us what parts of us are being ignored and suppressed, what habitual identities, beliefs or old self-images are we too caught up in, what out of date beliefs needs to be questioned and let go of and or what vulnerability or unfelt emotion needs to be accepted, supported and or expressed.* Instead of trying to find a ladder to get out of the hole of your depression, **find a spade and go deeper into it.**  
Become more intimate with yourself to answer these important questions. How is my depression here to help or wake me up? Ironically, some clients hold onto their depression because it serves a protective purpose or gives them a familiar and predictable identity. **Sometimes, it gives them a reason to avoid risks, to not feel grief, anger, shame or vulnerability hiding underneath.** In that sense, **depression is a solution to a deeper problem. Although it can keep us stuck, it can also keep us safe and a trade-off for feeling more vulnerable core emotions.** Sometimes despair is safer than facing the vulnerability and uncertainty of stepping into life and relationships more fully.
- 2. Know the anatomy of your depression** – Become aware of the building blocks of your depression. How does it manifest in thinking patterns (e.g. worry re the future, second guessing, obsessive thinking, self-judgement, rumination about the past or catastrophizing about the future), deep assumptions/beliefs e.g Everything's hopeless, nothing works out for me; images, feelings (e.g. grief, fear, hurt, anger or shame), body sensations and tension levels (often tense, or alternatively heavy or flaccid muscles), your breath (often shallow!), energy levels, postures (often slumped), and behaviours (often avoidant and isolating)? How is it manifesting right now in this moment? What might be triggering it? Is it situational, episodic or long term?
- 3. Inquire- What are its origins, pre-disposing and perpetuating factors** – when did it first start in your life? What original events or situations may have caused or triggered it? ***How does it get perpetuated by your attitude or relationship towards it?*** Do you unconsciously have a theory of change or core attitude that perpetuates it? e.g. That you should always be happy, that it's not Ok to be sad, need support or feel scared, that things should always go according to plan, that your suffering is caused by everyone else (blaming others) or that you should be constantly confident, certain and in control of how life goes? **How does your lifestyle help or maintain it** e.g. a poor diet (e.g. high sugar, low nutrition or high caffeine intake), poor sleep habits, lack of exercise and movement, healthy routines and structure, nutritional deficiency, or lack of meaningful activities or creative hobbies.
- 4. If you relapse** – if you have lapsed back into a depressive episode after a period of being depression free, it is vitally important to be aware of your attitude towards a lapse! **The greatest risk factor for a depressive lapse is to judge and shame yourself for having a lapse.** This tends to then generate a longer relapse. Shame and self-judgement tend to amplify depression, intensifying feelings of failure, shame and hopelessness, and the impulse to isolate and withdraw. The best way to come out of a depressive relapse is to (as best you can) let go of any potential expectations and super-ego attack that

you should be over this, and to accept that your low mood has **just triggered old patterns of thinking and feeling**. If you are wanting to be on a path towards self-development and growth, it might help to reframe that “*What’s in the way, is the way!!*” See if you can reframe the episode an opportunity to learn about what triggered you, what thoughts did you get hooked into, **what ideal self-images (e.g. I should be over this by now) or shame based (I’m such a failure) images did you get re-attached too?** Remind yourself that you are only human and that everyone gets retriggered by things that evoke their past beliefs and wounds.

5. **Know your negativity bias tendencies**– Neuroscientists have discovered that due to our evolutionary history of growing up around constant danger, we are wired to look for and notice the threats in our world, what is wrong and needs improvement in ourselves or others. *We are 'teflon' for the positive and 'velcro' for the negative*. Where do you get most hooked into this pattern of noticing what’s wrong with yourself or the world? e.g. With your work, your relationships, your parenting, your lifestyle choices, your body, your health, your friendships, your identity? This survival instinct is wired in our primitive brain. Part of this motivation to notice physical and social threats is because *we naturally want to be safe, in control, accepted and to belong to a group*. Hence, we are wired to notice any threats to our belonging and safety, so that we can then hopefully take action (relate, fight or flee) to feel safer again. This is very human. However, the more we focus our attention on what’s wrong with myself or life, or where the threat is, the more we strengthen those same fear and depression based neural pathways and trigger stress hormones into our system (e.g cortisol and adrenalin), that can give rise to stress and health related symptoms e.g., body tension, lowered immunity, digestive problems, chronic fatigue etc. **When you have awareness of your negativity bias’s you have more choice to then practice putting your attention on the opposite – What’s good, nurturing, nourishing, pleasurable, beautiful and or working for you in your life?** The more you put your attention on what supports you, the more your threat perception system starts to relax and the safer and more regulated in your body you can feel. A key principle here is “**What you put your attention on grows!**” or, as they say in Buddhism – “*The mind takes its shape, from what it rests its attention on*”. With awareness, you get to choose!
6. **Take in the good!** – An antidote to the negativity bias is to intentionally pay more attention to what’s working, and what gives us a sense of safety, connection, meaning, purpose, pleasure and satisfaction, and to allow this to become absorbed into our awareness and body. Notice any exceptions to when depression visits? **Are there times that you are less depressed or suffering?** e.g., When your exercising, being with friends you care about, relaxing, being in nature? When we notice something that opens your heart, touches, supports, relaxes or gives you pleasure can you be curious and stay with this feeling in your body. This is the foundational principle of positive psychology and what is known as **self-directed neuro-plasticity**. *When we pay attention to (sense and absorb) the good (exceptions to being depressed), we start to rewire our brain and develop neural pathways that support the development of wellbeing and happiness in the brain circuits*. When these brain circuits develop, we start to shift our mood from pessimism to optimism, and ultimately attract more positivity into our lives. This sense of wellbeing then supports and invites better personal and professional relationships. Can you practice noticing what your grateful for, what you appreciate, do well, and where you feel supported? What can you savour in your life that is pleasurable, soothing, empowering, supportive, caring? *Please note –the practice of taking in the good can be scary, as some of us are scared to feel too good, in case it gets taken away and leaves us disappointed or scared. Hence some unconsciously decide that it’s safer to feel unhappy. As the saying goes, “better the certainty of misery, than the misery of uncertainty!”*
7. **Tune into our common humanity** – When we dig a little deeper, we often discover that our pain is universal. We universally are wired to experience pain– e.g. We all have to face (or choose to fight!) the existential givens of life – we grow old, experience loss, regret, come to terms with impermanence, limitations, experience shame, navigate illness, suffer from pain and loss, face failure and rejection, and go through heart-ache. When we can see the universal fate in our pain we can connect with our

**common humanity**, and this can bring in a sense of connection, compassion and a realization that *we are all 'fellow travellers' sharing a similar existence and set of life challenges*. We can feel less alone and realize **that our pain doesn't have to be worn as an identity, like an old heavy winter coat**. This can take away the sense of 'shame about shame', and the belief that we are the 'only one' going through this kind of suffering. There are probably thousands of other people on this planet right now that are feeling the same fears and struggles, and having the same thoughts and conflicts as you are right now! What difference does it make to your suffering when you hold this perspective in mind? There is a very powerful Tibetan Buddhist compassionate practice called **Tonglen**, which invites us to identify and breath into your suffering and the suffering of all those on this planet who have experienced similar pain to you, and to then, on the out-breath, breath out compassion and good will to yourself and all others. Please experiment with this! Its surprisingly powerful.

8. **Practice self-compassion** - We can learn to switch from the reptilian brain that's preoccupied with survival (fight, flight, freeze, appease and collapse), to the mammalian nurturing and attachment orientated part of the brain (rest, bond and relax) via the simple act of self-compassion. For example, we can touch ourselves in ways that convey self-compassion and evoke feelings of safety, soothing, softening and relaxation in our biology. E.g. *Notice what happens when you put one hand on your heart, and one hand on your belly for few minutes*. Often this exercise evokes oxytocin (which is the hormone that is associated with bonding and self-soothing) and reduces the stress hormones cortisol and adrenalin. Although our sceptical minds may find this hard to believe, it's much more effective to feel safe and motivated from self-compassion, rather than be run by the inner critic and the anxiety that it evokes. Doing this self-touch via skin to skin can also be more effective. This communicates directly to our physiology in an instant and profound way that we are attuned too and 'there' for ourselves. Then practice saying to yourself kind self-statements – e.g *May I be happy, May I forgive myself for being imperfect (anxious or depressed), May I accept my limitations and vulnerabilities as part of being human, May I be kind to myself*. As you gently and silently say these statements to yourself, while having your hand on your heart, see what happens in your body. You may notice that you start to soften, relax and feel more self compassion towards your own and common human suffering.
9. **Identify and disengage from your 'Inner Critic' and negative beliefs**– We often believe we need our 'inner critic' to motivate us towards change and to become 'enough', or to protect us from further interpersonal danger. I have heard many clients tell me that that without self-criticism they will stop changing, striving and growing, and become nobody, or that they will be rejected! **We often believe our 'thoughts are facts' and that they tell us who we are and what our future holds!** Even though they may feel real, they are most often not true? What if they are just conditioned stories, opinions and sound bites in your head that you hold onto because that is what you know and are familiar with? Ironically, we often hold onto our negative beliefs/expectations because deep down we think we need them to feel safe, secure or to recognise ourselves as some form of familiar identity. We would prefer to hold onto an unhelpful story about ourself and the world (our worldview) than to tolerate the mystery/uncertainty of who we are and could become. Do you ever inquire into and question what you tell yourself? Identify your 'supposed too's, should's and worst self-judgements. Choose one of the top 3 worst beliefs you tell yourself, write it down and then ask the following questions from deep within your heart and body. *In my deepest knowing, Is it really true? How does it effect me when I believe this story? (e.g. somatically, emotionally, behaviourally). What is good about believing this thought/story? Who would I be if I stopped believing that thought/story? How would it impact my identity? What would be different in my life if I didn't entertain this belief anymore? What would I like to believe that is more self-compassionate and accurate?* If you begin to identify and question your self-judgements and beliefs you can start to dis-identify from them and realise you are truly far more vast, mysterious, complex and full of unknown potential than any thought or belief about yourself can ever capture!
10. **Befriend your emotions**– As mentioned, it's not uncommon that *depression is a result of core emotions or a vulnerability you have refused to consciously relate too and turn towards..* However, when we stay fully present to our feelings in our body (without going into our minds and stories), by

recognising, naming and allowing them, we often discover that they tend to flow through us in waves, often in a matter of a few minutes (this has been confirmed by neuroscience!). We discover that our feelings can become workable. Noticing and naming our feelings e.g *right now I am aware of feeling sad*, gets our frontal lobes on line and calms down the reptilian brain. However, *the practice of staying with our disturbing experience is counter-instinctual and counter-cultural*. Our normal and natural instinct is to want to get away from painful feelings and sensations, and seek pleasurable or neutral ones. **The path of growth and sanity is counter-instinctual and requires much courage, compassion and curiosity!**

It involves learning to become aware of and then to **'be present with'** these unpleasant sensations and emotions, to breathe into and hang with them, without getting caught up in any story or identity about them. Can you do the counter-instinctual move to recognise, label, tolerate, embody and allow the intensity of these painful feelings and sensations, and refrain from any attempt to go into your thoughts about them e.g figuring them out, judging them, fixing or jumping to conclusions about them. Can we sit with the intense wave of our feelings, at the sensation level and let it flow through us till they complete – which they always do. Remember feelings are impermanent, and they don't define you! They are just **energy in motion**, not who you are. To go one step deeper, listen to the message in your feelings or depression/anxiety – is it here to tell you about what you need to feel in more balanced and complete. This is true self-acceptance. True unconditional confidence comes from befriending all of our feelings, yet at the same time not over-identifying with or getting velcoed to them. If you have a habit of rejecting your vulnerable feelings, you're at risk of accumulating unfinished business, and ultimately becoming disconnected and depressed. As the saying goes, "What you resist persists!! What you allow you go beyond". However, *If we are not afraid of our feelings, we not afraid of life. What we really fear is not life, but our feelings that life evokes. If we can learn to befriend and welcome all our feelings, we have the courage to fully facing life.*

11. **Take perspective** – Find a way to step back and see the bigger picture of your situation. Taking perspective about what is happening to you in a wiser, wider, more compassionate, lighter way can make a huge difference to your suffering. Before you jump to any conclusions and take action about a situation, first bracket your immediate conclusions and reactions, take perspective and look at the whole situation. It could include – imagining looking at your current situation from your future 'wiser' self 10 years from now. Could you write a letter or speak from your adult compassionate self, to the part of you that is suffering or depressed (e.g. the younger part)? Can you relate to the depressed, scared or suffering part of yourself the way you would to a close friend or a child? If your feeling shame about something, ask yourself what is or was too much or missing in the environment that's leaving me feeling shamed. Normally we interpret shame as solely about ourselves e.g. I am too much or not enough, rather than looking at how the environment is or was contributing to our shame through its lack of support.
12. **Find meaning and purpose in your suffering-** Finding meaning and purpose in this one wild and precious life are two important core human needs that support us to have good mental health. This may include having faith in a force greater than oneself and a perspective that can make meaning out of adversity e.g. a spiritual perspective. One way (amongst many!) to do this is to see everything as a learning opportunity- See what changes in your experience if you treat everything that happens to you as a training moment to receive feedback and learn about yourself. What changes if you hold a growth mindset (as opposed to a fixed mindset), and attitude that *'the obstacle is the path'*, that *everything that happens to you is an opportunity for becoming more resilient, awake, wise and aware!* People who trigger you are also your best teachers for self awareness. Mistakes, adversities and challenges are opportunities for learning! Your reactions to 'what happens' to you can become an opportunity to see what you're believing, holding onto, pushing away, or protecting in yourself that may not be serving you anymore. Remember, it is not the events of life that effect you as much as the way you interpret, see and respond to them. As Anais Nin famously said – *"We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are"*. You may not be able to control what is happening around you, but you can control your response to it! **It's what you do with and the meaning you make out of what happens to you that makes the difference!** When we have an attitude of being a learner, we are in the ripe opportunity to

listen to our experience so that we can grow in wisdom, discrimination, insight and compassion. We can let go of being the one who should be perfect, the expert, the knower and the accomplished one, and see ourselves as a learner of life who is allowed to make mistakes, be limited, be imperfect, to have a beginners mind and learn. From this place it is a lot easier to navigate life challenges, take risks, and move forward. The irony also is that we function in a much better and effective way when we are present, open and relaxed. One way to relax is to see everything that happens to you as a learning or growth opportunity - *What's in the way, is the way!*

13. **Have a daily mindfulness practice** – We brush our teeth everyday to keep them clean and in good health. We can do this for our mind too - By taking time out each day to pause and stop, and pay attention to your moment-by-moment experience in a mindful way. **Mindfulness is paying attention on purpose to your present moment experience with acceptance.** The more we learn to do this the more our awareness has the chance to relax, open and become spacious enough to observe, include and accept everything inside us without resistance. Through mindfulness practices, you can train your mind to become as spacious as the vast sky, which can include and accept all the weather patterns that pass through it (mental content) without being threatened by, caught up in or defined by it. Another mindfulness practice is to shift your attention from your mind and come into your senses regularly during the day! Instead - Look, sense and listen! You can do mindfulness formally by having a regular meditation practice, or informally via doing yoga, going for walks or being in nature, having a mindful shower or simply sit on the couch and tune into your immediate experience of thoughts, feelings, sensations and sense perceptions. Recent research has discovered that having a regular mindfulness practice has been associated with increased capacities in self-compassion, body awareness, intuition, fear regulation, problem solving, well-being, empathy, impulse control, compassion towards others and a better immune system (Dan Siegel, 2007). Not only this, but mindfulness gives us meta-cognitive awareness, which is the ability to notice thoughts as just thoughts, rather than incontrovertible truths, or the totality of who we are. This capacity helps us get un-velcroed from them, and as a result reduces a lot of suffering caused by being lost in unhelpful thoughts.
14. **Visualize what you want**– Imagine how you want to feel, think and behave differently. Can you focus on what you want to feel or do differently and really imagine doing it? *Neuro-scientists have found that when we imagine doing something vividly in great detail, we are actually firing the same neural pathways that would get activated as when we are actually doing it.* This mental rehearsal actually supports us to develop new neural pathways in the direction of what we want, and makes it easier to then act in ways that are aligned with our true north and that will attract what we want. There is a saying - **Energy goes where attention goes!** If you put your attention on what you don't want e.g. imagining a worst scenario of you not coping, then you are putting your energy there, strengthening the neural circuits of worry, generating feelings of stress and anxiety, and behaving in ways that potentially attract the very things you fear. If you put your attention on what you do want and really visualize having and feeling the way you want to, you are more likely to attract this into your life. This is also known as the Law of Attraction. The secret of doing this step of visualizing how you want to feel, think and behave differently is to do it from a place of acceptance of where you already are. Genuine change happens not from a place of self-rejection, but from a place of self-acceptance.
15. **Connect** - The need for human connection and attachment is considered by many to be our deepest most fundamental human need. Research has found that being connected is one of the greatest protective factors against physical, emotional and spiritual dis-ease. Hence it can help to develop some skills to nurture your relationships via learning to communicate, reach out for support, listen and repair ruptures well. It can make a huge difference if we can find one or two people in our life that we can trust enough to be at least a little bit authentic, vulnerable and open with e.g. to express your fears, emotions, hopes and needs with. Vulnerability and authenticity is the birthplace of intimacy, true belonging and courage, and you can only truly belong if you're willing to be authentic and risk showing your vulnerability. This practice requires you to be willing to work on accepting yourself! Do you express your needs for

support, or let in support when it is offered to you? Can you risk expressing your boundaries, needs, feelings and thoughts with people close to you in a clear non-reactive way? Do you also show interest and listen to others with an open, curious, non-judgemental heart? Can you repair a rupture in a friendship or relationship by saying sorry, check out your assumptions about what someone is thinking about you, forgive someone for being imperfect or acknowledging and own your part in a conflict or disagreement without getting defensive or blaming of the other. These basic skills can make a huge difference to the quality of your relationship.

16. **Become aware of being aware** –Becoming aware of being aware is a spiritual practice that takes us out of being caught up in the content of thoughts, images, feelings and sensations into the realm of presence and spacious awareness. Presence is when we can tune into the underlying and simple knowing of our own being, that at the heart and centre of who we really are. When we can tap into this sense of our presence, we are able to experience a part of us that can witness from a distance the flow of our thoughts, feelings and sensations without getting caught up in them and taking them to be the totality of who we are. This attunement to our own presence, the simple and direct, undeniable knowing of our own basic naked awareness prior to thoughts and concepts, can give us a sense of spaciousness, inner freedom, clarity and peace. This place is unaffected by the content of our everyday thoughts, feelings and sensations. This innate presence that is naturally curious, calm, confident, courageous, connected and compassionate is always here, lying beneath the waves of our experience, and can become a gateway to deep inner peace even when the waves are turbulent.
17. **Move**- One very well-known and researched antidote to depression is to move and do some kind of exercise – movement and exercise help the nervous system get more energy into it, as well as discharges an accumulated stress. It supports natural endorphins, and releases stress hormones. See if you can practice doing some form of daily exercise e.g. gym, yoga, walking, swimming, Pilates, running or something else. When we are moving, we send a signal to our body that we are not stuck, shut down or frozen. It gives the body and mind a sense of energy, agency and empowerment, which are often the anti-dotes to the more passive energy of depression and stagnation.
18. **Eat well** - finally, remember - we are what we eat! Please consider that what you eat that may vastly contribute to your lowered mood e.g. high sugar or caffeine intake, lack of vegetables or fruit, pro-biotics and supplements. Research has indicated that a huge mediating factor for our wellbeing is having a healthy diet rich in nutrients, minerals and fibre. We also now know that having a healthy gut biome also influences our mind and contributes to our mood and hormones, supporting a better functioning immune system, healthy sleep, digestion and improved mood (Giulia Enders, 2014)