

SIMPLE
STEPS TO

OVERCOME
DEPRESSION



Simple Steps To Overcome Depression



By Dr. Sarah Allen



Simple Steps To Overcome Depression

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Thank you for downloading my free booklet. If you have got this far you are probably struggling with your emotions in some way and want to change how you are feeling. I am here to help.

When you feel overwhelmed and depressed, life's challenges, big or small, are a lot harder to manage. In this report I have highlighted areas of your life where you can make small changes, which added together result in big changes in your mood. You won't be able to do all these things I suggest in the report at once, but adding one or two small changes a day to your routine can really help to improve your mood and make life more enjoyable. When you come to think about it, this is what life ought to be.

When clients first come in to see me they want to know how to feel less sad, unmotivated, angry and worried. They are often overwhelmed and not sure where to begin. I put together this report to highlight four areas in our lives that we can start to make changes and they will help you move in the right direction:



- 1. Know What You Are Dealing With – Is It the Blues or Depression**
- 2. Start Looking After Yourself – You Are Important!**
- 3. Increase Your Positive Activities**
- 4. Change the Way You Are Thinking About Things**

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Step 1. Know What You Are Dealing With.

Sometimes people have been feeling less than happy for such a long time that it feels like their normal state and they may only start to question whether they have depression after a loved one has pointed it out. Remember too, that symptoms are on a continuum ranging from mild to severe or sometimes people feel unhappy about a specific situation and are not necessarily experiencing clinical levels of depression; they just need some help dealing with a particular problem.

Also, we can experience both depression and anxiety symptoms at the same time. The steps in this report will also help to reduce anxiety but you may also be interested in reading my booklet **Simple Steps to Reduce Anxiety & Worrying** available to download from my [Anxiety Treatment](#) page.

Surprisingly, symptoms of depression are not always connected to your mood and emotions, they can be physical too. Read on to see if you have been experiencing any of the symptoms below and then the next section will discuss the different types of depression.

Common Emotional/Mood Symptoms of Depression

Feelings of Helplessness & Hopelessness. This can include thinking that nothing will ever get better and there's nothing you can do to improve your situation.



Loss Of Interest In Daily Activities. Maybe you have lost your ability to feel joy and pleasure or perhaps former interests, hobbies and social activities no longer hold any interest.

Anger or Irritability. Perhaps you are feeling agitated, restless, or even so angry that you fear you might be violent. Depression makes our tolerance level very low, our temper is on a short fuse, and everything and everyone can just gets on our nerves.



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Self-Criticism. You might be harshly criticizing yourself for perceived faults and mistakes. These are usually followed by strong feelings of worthlessness, guilt or shame.

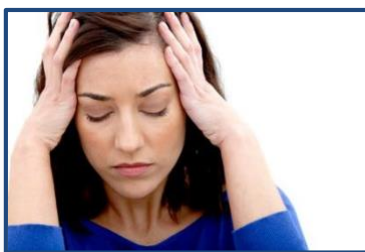
Reckless Behavior. In order to try to escape such difficult feeling some people start to engage in escapist behavior such as substance abuse, compulsive gambling, reckless driving, or dangerous sports.

Common Physical Symptoms of Depression

Appetite or Weight Changes. Significant weight loss or weight gain is often an indicator of depression. Some people feel they just don't have an appetite any more while others push down their feelings with emotional eating.

Sleep Changes. This can be either sleeping too little (insomnia) , difficulty getting off to sleep or waking in the early hours of the morning, or oversleeping and sleeping during the day when most people are active (hypersomnia).

Loss of Energy. Feeling fatigued, sluggish, and physically drained. Depression can make your whole body feel heavy, and even small tasks are exhausting and overwhelming or may take longer than usual to complete.



Concentration Problems. People often describe this as feeling foggy headed or they have trouble focusing, making decisions, and remembering things.

Unexplained Aches & Pains. We can feel depression in our body, not just our head. When depression hits it is often accompanied by an increase in physical complaints such as headaches, back pain, achiness and stomach pain.



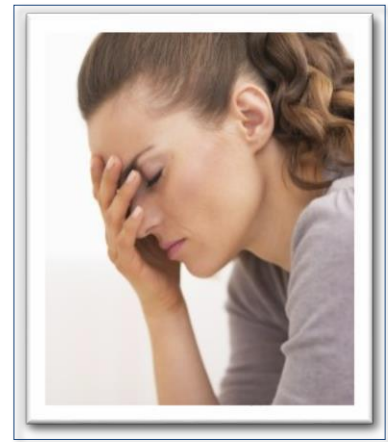
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Are There Different Types Of Depression?

Yes, and it is important to know what type of depression you have so therapy is geared to the correct treatment.

Dysthymic Disorder or Dysthymia

This is when symptoms are mild to moderate and they have been around for two or more years. These chronic symptoms that may not be severe enough to disable a person but it makes it very difficult to live life to the fullest or even remember better times. You may not enjoy being with other people or get excited for an upcoming event that people usually find enjoyable. If you suffer from dysthymia, you may feel like you've always been depressed.



Or perhaps you think that your continuous low mood is “just the way you are.” People with dysthymia are also at risk for experiencing one or more episodes of major depression during their lifetimes. However, dysthymia can be treated, even if your symptoms have gone unrecognized or untreated for years.

Minor Depression

This is similar to the way people feel when they have dysthymia but for a shorter time. People can have some depression symptoms for 2 weeks or longer but not meet full criteria for major depression. Without treatment, people with minor depression are at high risk for developing major depressive disorder so it is important to reach out for help sooner rather than later.

Major depressive disorder

This can also be called **major depression**, and it is when the depression symptoms mentioned earlier are severe enough to interfere with a person's ability to work, sleep, study, eat, and enjoy once-pleasurable activities. Major depression is disabling and prevents a person from functioning normally.



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Some people may experience only a single episode within their lifetime, but more often a person may have multiple episodes. Some forms of depression are slightly different, or they may develop under unique circumstances. They include:

Psychotic Depression, which occurs when a person has severe depression plus some form of psychosis, such as having irrational and disturbing false beliefs or a break with reality (delusions), or perhaps hearing or seeing upsetting things that others cannot hear or see (hallucinations).

Pregnancy or Postpartum Depression, which is much more serious than the “baby blues” that many women experience after giving birth, when hormonal and physical changes and the new



responsibility of caring for a newborn can be overwhelming. It is estimated that 15 to 20 percent of women experience postpartum depression after giving birth and approximately 10–15% of pregnant women experience depression too. For more in depth information visit my [Pregnancy & Postpartum Mood Disorders](#) page.

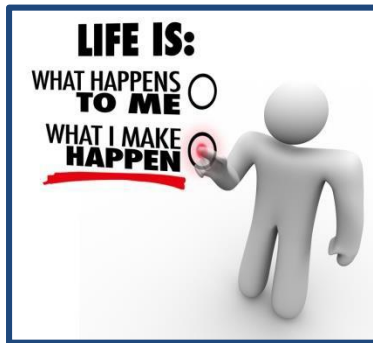
Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), happens when people only get depression during the winter months, when there is less natural sunlight. The depression symptoms generally lift during spring and summer. SAD may be effectively treated with light therapy, but nearly half of those with SAD do not get better with light therapy alone but psychotherapy can reduce SAD symptoms, either alone or in combination with light therapy and in some cases medication.

Bipolar Disorder, also called manic-depressive illness, is not as common as major depression or dysthymia. It is characterized by cycling mood changes—from extreme highs (e.g. mania) to extreme lows (e.g. depression). Mania which can include impulsive behavior, hyperactivity, rapid speech, and little to no sleep switches to depression, usually the symptoms of major depression. Typically, the switch from one mood extreme to the other is gradual, with each manic or depressive episode lasting



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for at least several weeks. However, although it can look similar to major depression, the treatments for bipolar depression are very different. In fact, antidepressants can make bipolar depression worse.



Any type of depression can make you feel helpless, hopeless, empty and numb. It might seem that you have been feeling this way forever and there's no hope of feeling better, but there's a lot you can do to take back control and change how you feel. With help and support, you can overcome depression and get your life back. The key to recovery is to start small and take things one day at a time. Feeling

better takes time, but you can get there with the support of professionals who are trained to help.

So what can you do to start improving the way you feel? Take charge of your body, your thoughts, your emotions, your schedule and the way you deal with problems. It seems hard right now but you can take small steps and as you begin to feel better, the more progress you make.

Doing nothing will only make problems worse!

Step 2: Boost Your Mood By Increasing Your Positive Emotions

The easiest and most enjoyable way to improve your mood is to increase the amount of time you spend doing positive activities. You may have found that feeling depression has sapped all your energy and it is hard to get the motivated to get going with anything outside of things that must be done. One of the most important ways to improve your mood is to take the view that life isn't something to just get through, it is something to enjoy!





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Here's an important question. When was the last time you actually asked yourself – “What is it that I want?” We often get in to the habit of looking after others’ needs, especially your children and partner, and forget that sometimes you have to make yourself a priority too. I am not talking about being selfish, just recognizing that you deserve the kindness you show to others to be directed at you too. Start simple – “What do I want for dinner?” not “I’ll make what everyone else will eat”. Include your needs in there sometimes too.

This includes taking time for your own interests. We often get so busy that we don’t make time for fun in our lives. We are so busy striving to “get everything done” – working, running around after the children, keeping on top of laundry and the house – that we don’t stop to have fun or to relax and just be still.



One of the most important things we can do to improve our mood is to increase the things we do that make us happy. Make time for friends, time to relax, get back to doing a hobby you enjoyed in the past and most importantly, try something new. Novel activities challenge our brain to pay attention and combining attention and positive emotions helps to build positive neural pathways in our brains. It wakes us up so we are not going through life on automatic pilot!



Doing something, anything really, can feel overwhelming when you are depressed. You may not think that you will enjoy doing an activity, but often, once you make yourself do something (and you can always stop doing it at any time) you feel better. Each push you give yourself moves you further forward, increases your energy and makes the next thing you try easier. Doing nothing keeps you in that downward spiral of negative emotions.



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What Is The Number One Thing We Can Do To Boost Happiness?



Gratitude, the state or feeling of being thankful, is an almost universal concept among world cultures. In fact, nearly all of the world's spiritual traditions emphasize the importance of giving thanks in some way. Research on gratitude and appreciation suggests that people, who score higher on gratitude scales, also score higher on happiness ratings.

One of the most popular psychology techniques to practice appreciation is by writing a gratitude letter. In this method, a person writes a letter to anyone who they feel has positively impacted their life—stating in detail how they bettered their life. It could be a parent, a teacher, a friend, an employer—virtually anyone.

Then, they arrange to meet with and read their letter to this person who positively impacted their life. Research shows that this technique greatly increases a person's level of happiness for up to a full month. Even if actually going to read the letter in person makes you feel uncomfortable, the act of writing a letter and not even mailing it increases positive emotions too.



This technique has been shown to increase happiness the most for the people who are the unhappiest. So if you are feeling sad when you do this, the greater the boost it will give you.



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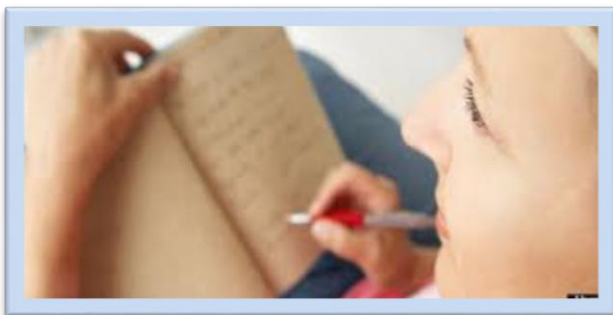
Another Simple Way to Increase Happiness

One of the most successful techniques to come out of the Positive Psychology movement (Seligman) is the task of keeping a daily journal where you write down three positive things that have happened during your day. It doesn't need a lot of journaling if that's not your thing. It's simple, every evening jot down three things that have made you feel happy.

Why does this work? Well, if we know we have to write something in the evening, we keep our eyes open during the day and therefore are more likely to notice and pay a little bit more attention to positive events. Quite simply, noticing something positive and noting how it makes us feel happy makes our brain increase serotonin. If we do this regularly, over time we increase our happiness.

I have tweaked it a little bit and have divided this daily task into two sections; things that we just observe and things that we made happen. It only takes a couple of minutes to write down three examples of each.

Three Things That Made You Smile/Feel Good



Write down three positive things that you noticed today.

"I saw the daffodils were poking through the soil next to my garage and it made me smile that spring is finally on its way".

"My son came through the door and gave me a big hug hello".

"I looked at a cartoon on Facebook and thought it was so funny I laughed out loud".

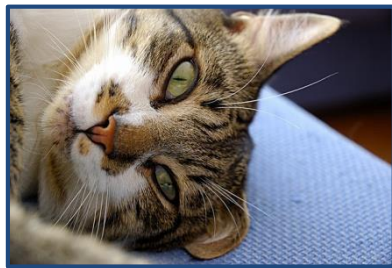


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When we are feeling down we tend to just focus on the negative and ignore the positive. Part of therapy is to widen your focus to include things that went well and that you enjoyed, not just what irritated you. The act of noticing and paying attention to the experience makes the brain take more notice and therefore feel more pleasure. This is the opposite of being on automatic pilot as you go through your day.

Three Things That You Had A Part In Making It Positive

Jot down three things that went well for you today. Why did it happen, what role did you play?



"I began the morning in a relaxed way by lying in bed cuddling with my kitty cat – because I set the alarm to go off ten minutes earlier than I needed to get up I still had plenty of time to get ready".

"I felt very connected to my child because I put down my phone and really listened to how his day at school had gone".

"I had a lot of work to get done but I made myself take a break and take my friend up on her offer of going for a walk. Afterwards I felt more refreshed and was able to be more productive".

Just as we tend to ignore the positive and notice the bad things that have happened, we also tend to ignore the positive influence we have over things and events. I think it is so important to recognize not only what was good, but how you came to make it happen so you can hopefully repeat it in the future.

The same with negative things – if you have the attitude that things just happen rather than recognizing what you did or didn't do to affect the outcome - it makes events feel out of your control and we humans are happiest when we feel some sense of control.



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Step 3. Look After Yourself – You Are Important Too

There is a huge connection between our physical health and our mental health. The following section on how to look after yourself can also be found in my booklet **Simple Steps to Overcome Anxiety & Worrying** so if you have downloaded both booklets you will notice that the information is repeated but that is because looking after yourself really helps improve your mood, whatever negative emotion you are experiencing.

Get More Sleep!

Getting more sleep sounds easy in theory, but so many people find it hard to achieve. The average amount of sleep needed by adults for their body and mind to be fully rested is around seven to eight hours a night. This of course can vary but you know you aren't getting enough when your mood is negatively affected.

Lack of sleep can stop you thinking clearly, wrecks productivity and can alter your mood significantly. According to the National Sleep Foundation (NSF) the "walking tired" anger more easily, have problematic relationships and are less likely than those who sleep well to exercise, eat healthfully, have sex and engage in fun leisure activities; all because they are too tired.



What with work, errands and seeing to your family's needs, you have so much to do that you can only get them done by staying up late. Maybe going to bed in the wee hours is the only way to get some "me time".

Staying up late is probably not working for you though and improving your sleep is one of the best ways to



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improve the quality of your life. We need to work on being either more organized or less perfectionist about getting things done, knowing it's okay to ask and expect help, and knowing it is totally necessary to have "me time". But not at the expense of sleep!

In the meantime, we need to work on setting up a good night-time routine. Our every day "to do list" is much less daunting when we are refreshed!

The National Sleep Foundation states "It's not uncommon for people who don't get enough sleep to be depressed or for people who are depressed to not sleep well enough." This is very 'chicken and the egg'. Who knows which comes first, but what we do know is that over time, impaired memory, mood and other functions become a chronic way of life. In the long term, this can affect your job or relationships.

So how can we improve sleep? Firstly, keep regular sleeping hours. **A bedtime ritual** teaches the brain to become familiar with sleep times and wake times and programs the brain and internal body clock to get used to a set routine. Most adults need between six and nine hours of sleep every night. By working out what time you need to wake up, you can work backwards and set a regular bedtime schedule.

Here Are Some Ways To Relax

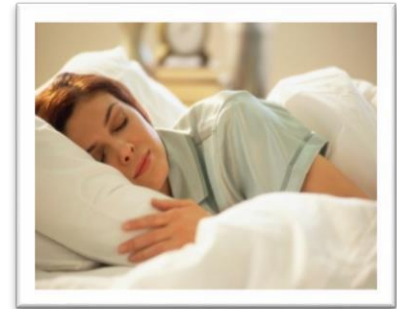
- ❖ Have a warm bath (not hot) as this will help your body reach a temperature that's ideal for rest.
- ❖ Writing "to do" lists for the next day can organize your thoughts and clear your mind of any worrying thoughts that pop in to your head (more about that later...)
- ❖ Relaxation exercises, such as light yoga stretches, help to relax the muscles. Don't exercise vigorously though, as it will have the opposite effect.
- ❖ Relaxation CDs can help as they use a hypnotic voice to guide you through muscle relaxation and soothing music and sound effects to relax your brain.
- ❖ Watching TV or any computer or phone screen keeps the brain engaged and active so it is harder to fall asleep. It is better to read a book or listen to the radio as that relaxes the mind by distracting it from the present worries.



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Secondly, you can't expect to "go, go, go", then be able to fall straight to sleep. **Winding down** is a critical stage in preparing for bed.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember in getting enough sleep is that **your needs are important** and putting your need for sleep above the demands of others is the kindest thing you can do for yourself and those who are important to you. Insomnia can often be caused by lying awake worrying which brings me to the next step I think it is important to work on in order to improve your mood.



Exercise – It Really Does Help To Boost Your Mood

Here are 7 reasons why exercise helps you feel happier:

- Just 20 minutes of exercise a day will calm your mind and lower stress hormones. Exercise boosts endorphins and serotonin levels as well as other brain chemicals that improve your mood.
- Physical activity is being increasingly recognized as an effective tool to treat depression as research has shown that 30 minutes of exercise a day x 5 days a week = same positive mood effects as taking an antidepressant
- New research has taken the connection one step further, finding that moderate exercise can actually prevent episodes of depression in the long term.





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- Exercise helps you gain confidence - Meeting exercise goals or challenges, even small ones, can boost your self-confidence.
- It can take your mind off worries. Exercise is a distraction that can get you away from the cycle of negative thoughts that feed anxiety and depression.
- Can lead to increased social interaction. Exercise may give you the chance to meet or socialize with others. Just exchanging a friendly smile or greeting as you walk around your neighborhood can help your mood.
- Helps you cope in a healthy way. Doing something positive to manage anxiety or depression is a healthy coping strategy. Trying to feel better by drinking alcohol, dwelling on how badly you feel, or hoping anxiety or depression will go away on its own can lead to worsening symptoms.

So tell me again why you're not exercising? And before you say it's because you don't have enough time, go back to the previous section that stresses that you need to prioritize your needs. If it's because you don't like exercising, I think you probably just haven't tried the right activity yet. Exercise doesn't have to be just running on a treadmill. Also, one reason exercise works is because it heats up our bodies and that increases serotonin levels. Having a nice long shower or soak in the bath does that too, therefore, on days you can't exercise a relaxing bath is a good alternative.



The Relationship between Food & Mood

We have discussed how sleep and exercise influence our mood and the third important factor in taking care of our physical needs is all about what we eat.



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Feeling Cranky? You Need Fuel!

Did you snap at your kids...and the telemarketer on the phone? Crankiness can be a sign that your body needs fuel. Just like our kids, when our blood sugar levels drop, so does our mood. Just be sure to refuel the right way: with foods that don't leave you with a blood sugar crash an hour later. A great way to blast irritability is to eat *combination* foods at each meal and snack time. This means combine foods that contain a carbohydrate with either some protein or some fat.

Carbohydrates are a great source of energy that quickly burns out so adding some fat or protein will slow the digestion process, causing your sugar and energy levels to remain stable for a longer amount of time. A great example of a combination snack is an apple with peanut butter. The apple is your healthy complex carbohydrate and the peanut butter is a healthy fat.



Feeling Stressed? Bring Out the Chocolate (Yay!!!)



Stress is building, so what can calm you down fast? Experts say that chocolate—particularly dark chocolate—may help reduce the stress hormones that are swarming in your body. A study by Swiss researchers found that eating just a small bite of dark chocolate (about 1.4 ounces) has the power to lower the stress hormones cortisol and catecholamines in the body. Chocolate also increases serotonin levels reducing your anxiety. So, go on, treat yourself.



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Feeling Sad or Anxious? Go Fish...

There are many studies going back to 1998 that show how omega-3 fatty acid deficiency correlates with an increased rate of both anxiety and depression. Brain cell membranes are made up partly of omega-3s so it is possible that increasing omega-3 levels through food makes it easier for serotonin to pass through cell membranes. Research still needs to be done on the exact mechanisms involved but we do know that omega-3 does affect the membranes and changes cell functioning. The best sources of omega oils are cold water fish, eggs, nuts and fish oil supplements. Flax oil supplements are also good for vegetarians to increase their omega levels. As with all supplements, ask your doctor first to make sure there are no adverse reactions with current medications before trying fish oil. Also, there are some studies that show no change from taking omega oil but it is worth trying it for yourself for a few weeks and seeing if you notice any benefits.

Should You Try Medication?

For mild to moderate depression, talk therapy has been shown to be more effective than medication and does not have the intrusive negative physical side effects. Patients treated with cognitive therapy are more likely to get better than with other types of therapy and many studies have reported that patients using therapy vs. medication show more positive improvements at 12 months and longer post therapy.

However, when I work with someone who can see that the coping strategies we are talking about in therapy are a great idea but their depression makes them not have the motivation to be to do them,





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I often suggest having a consultation with a psychiatrist and used together, therapy and medication can really work well in lifting you to a place where you can utilize the strategies we are discussing. Specifically, antidepressants help reduce the extreme sadness, hopelessness, and lack of interest in life that are typical in people with depression.

Taking antidepressants can get you to a level where you can start to do things and think about things differently. If you don't make changes to your situation, coping skills, relationships etc. when feeling better on antidepressants though, it is likely that the depression will come back when you stop the medication.

I see antidepressants as one of the many useful tools to use to get back to feeling back in control of



your life and I work with good psychiatrists who prescribe the appropriate medications while I do the talk therapy (cognitive therapy). Medications do have side effects though and the benefits have to be weighed against the cons for on an individual basis as everyone responds differently. The most important thing is to work with someone who is experience and they will know how best to help you.

Step 4 – Cognitive Therapy: Changing The Way We Think About Things

I think that this is the most important change you can make to influence how you feel. Thoughts are the words we say to ourselves without speaking out loud. We can have many thoughts each hour of the day. Thoughts are private experiences; other people don't know what we're thinking unless we tell them and most importantly, people can have different thoughts about the same thing.





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When people are depressed their thoughts tend to veer to the negative and they are very good at looking for evidence that supports negative thinking, while tuning out information that shows neutral or positive information.



Thoughts can also be called ‘self-talk’ and the way we speak to ourselves really affects how we feel. When Self talk becomes so automatic that you don’t even realize that you’re doing it. For simple example: imagine that you are asleep in bed and a noise in the kitchen wakes you.

If you think – ‘oh, the cat knocked something over’ you will feel fine, turn over and go back to sleep.

If you think – ‘my selfish husband/son/roommate, they know I have to get up early tomorrow, they don’t care about waking me up’, you will feel angry and probably will toss and turn not getting to sleep because anger raises our adrenaline.

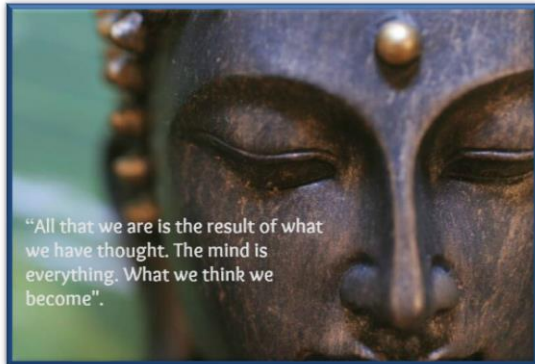
Lastly, if you think – “aghhh, there’s a burglar downstairs!”, you will feel scared and call 911.

In each case it is what you think that affects how you feel and your subsequent behavior.

What we think = how we feel = how we behave.



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Most importantly, you can change your mood and your behavior by changing what you say to yourself!

During therapy I ask clients to recognize when they feel a negative emotion such as anxiety, anger or sadness and “catch” the thought that they are having. These thoughts tend to be automatic and negative and because we are beating up on ourselves without even realizing it, they

elicit a negative emotion. Who wouldn't feel bad if they are telling themselves they can't do something or they are bad in some way.

This is the first part of the type of therapy I practice called Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT). It is a short-term "here and now" therapy that is a proven effective treatment for a wide range of problems including depression, anxiety, stress, eating /weight issues and relationship problems.

We then really focus on what you are thinking and challenge those thoughts so you can change your behavior and find out that the situation isn't as bad as you are thinking it is. By thinking and doing things differently, especially things that are out of your comfort zone, you build new pathways in the brain that increase serotonin and other feel good brain chemicals. I don't just mean let's turn all your negative thoughts into positive sunny ones. That wouldn't be realistic. Let's do a reality check instead. Then by looking at all the evidence you can challenge those unhelpful thoughts and develop a more balanced perspective.





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Thank you for taking the time to read my booklet. I hope it has been helpful and will go on to be a source of useful tips and tools you can use in everyday life. Remember though that you can't change everything at once. It is best to try to change one or two things at a time and work on those so they become useful new habits. Then go on to incorporate more changes, one at a time.



For more information about Dr. Sarah Allen's counseling services please visit her website at www.drSarahallen.com or contact her to discuss whether you could benefit from working with her on 847 791-7722 or email her on the contact form on this page www.drSarahallen.com/contact.

Please note: Dr. Allen's professional license only allows her to work with clients who travel to her Northbrook office or via remote sessions within IL.

Unfortunately, Dr. Allen's professional license doesn't allow her to offer personalized advice by email which is why she likes to write blog posts and booklets so she can share information with people who live too far to see her in person.

You can visit her blog on www.drSarahallen.com/blog or join her on Facebook <https://facebook.com/drsfcallen> to read more psychologically based tips on how to lead the life you want to live.



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About The Author



Dr. Sarah Allen is originally from the UK but has been living and raising her family in Northbrook, a northern suburb of Chicago, for over 20 years.

She received her doctorate in Clinical Psychology at Southampton University, England, where she trained in a psychotherapy treatment called cognitive behavior therapy (CBT).

CBT is short-term "here and now" therapy that is a proven effective treatment for a wide range of problems including depression, anxiety, stress, eating /weight issues and relationship problems.

Her skills and 25+ years of experience allow her to get to the root of problems quickly and show you practical ways to feel more in control of your life.

There are many ways we hold ourselves back from happiness. Sarah empowers her clients with the tools necessary to deal with the stress that life and relationships bring, both in the present and for when they show up again in the future.