

## The Road Ahead: Preventing Future Difficulties

Imagine that you put all of the skills in this manual into practice, and they work. You begin to feel better. This is what the research says should happen.

You may feel tempted to forget all about the skills that helped you get where you are. You might stop exercising, forget all about your diet, let your negative thinking go unchallenged, isolate yourself in front of the TV, let your goals slide, or do whatever else that might make you feel worse.



Why would you do this? Why would you stop doing the things that helped you? There are three main reasons:

1. People often feel they need a break. *“I’ve been working so hard on myself that I need a holiday from it.”* They forget that feeling better *is* the break that they were hoping for.
2. People decide they feel “good enough.” *“I was so low that I couldn’t stand it, but now it doesn’t feel quite so bad.”* They are less motivated by the pain, so it seems less urgent to take care of themselves.
3. People often feel that their low period was such a nightmare they want to forget all about it. *“Let’s just pretend the last year never happened, and get on with life.”* All of the self-care strategies are reminders of the bad time, so they get dropped.

The assumption underlying all of these ideas is that caring for yourself is something you do when you are feeling truly awful. This is a faulty idea. Here’s why:

- Good mental and physical health is much more than the absence of disease or distress. Caring for yourself when you are feeling “good enough” can help you to feel even better. For most people there is no need to sit on the edge of feeling terrible all the time.
- Your emotions and your sense of well-being give you valuable feedback about how your life is going. If you are beginning to feel down or anxious or overwhelmed, you can *use* this information as a cue to take a look at your life. Perhaps there is something more you could be doing to care for yourself. If you ignore these feelings, the situation may only get worse.

- Waiting until you feel truly miserable before you do something is a bad idea. You have probably already discovered that the more down or anxious you get, the more difficult it is to dig yourself back out again. If you could catch yourself before things got out of hand, it would be easier to overcome the problem.

By continuing to manage your life when you feel well, you can:

- ⇒ enhance your physical and psychological potential.
- ⇒ increase your enjoyment of life.
- ⇒ reduce the impact of energy-draining crises.

### **BUT: What if it comes back?**

Even when people feel better, they often worry that their bad period will return. After all, they felt that way once, so clearly they are capable of feeling that badly again. How can they reduce the chance of that happening?

One answer to that question is given above. Keep taking care of yourself. The strategies that help to make you feel well are, for the most part, the same ones that will *keep* you well.

But there are other strategies, too. That's what this section is about.

## **Plan Ahead for Stress**

A key part of prevention is early recognition. The earlier you become aware that your mood is changing or that a stressful event is going to have an impact on your life, the quicker you can act.

Major life events can be important predictors of depressive or anxious feelings. Events that may have a negative impact on people include:

- Death of a loved one
- Divorce
- Separations (e.g., a child going away to university)
- Health-related events (e.g., illness or pregnancy)
- New responsibilities and adjustments (e.g., new child in family, promotion)
- Work and/or school-related events (e.g., exams)
- Financial and material events (e.g., large investment, loss of money)

These events (and others like them) require a lot of adjustment in your life, which means additional stress.

Other factors that may predict a period of difficulty include:

- The onset of winter (for those with a seasonal pattern of mood problems).
- The end of a major project (with the sense of aimlessness or loss of direction that sometimes follows).
- A difficult milestone (such as the anniversary of a bad event in your life).

Perhaps you can think of others that might predict increased stress in your own life.

What should you do to cope with these times? Plan in advance. Don't wait until you feel overwhelmed. Begin coping *before* you have trouble.

- When possible, introduce the new stress gradually. For example, if you are returning to work after some time off on disability, see if you can go back part-time at first.
- Lighten up on your ongoing responsibilities – especially if you are about to get a lot of new ones. If you are about to have a new child, let people know that you will be less available. If you usually host dinners or the extended family, see if someone else will take over.
- Keep up your self-care. If regular exercise is one of the ways you keep balanced, figure out how to keep it in your life. If a weekly lunch with a close friend is important to you, work other things around it. Don't give up the things that keep you going when you most need them!
- Relax some of your standards. If you try to keep the house perfectly, recognize that you might not be able to keep it up to the same degree while you are attending night school. Give up on non-essential responsibilities and devote the time you save to your favourite stress-reducers instead.



### **Checkpoint: The Stress Plan**

Can you predict a period of a few weeks when you will be under more stress than usual? What will cause it and when is it likely to come?

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Rather than just hoping it goes well, try to develop a coping plan in advance. What can you do to help yourself get through this period?

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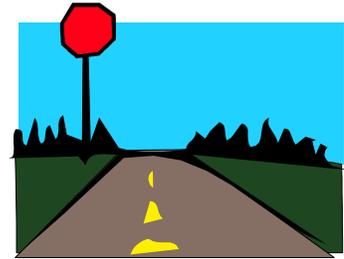
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## The Sign in the Road

If you have just gone through a difficult period in your life, you may find yourself wishing you could forget that it ever happened. Most people find that this is not such a good idea.



What was it that led you into that difficult period? Probably a combination of factors. Some of them you couldn't control, and may never be able to control. But perhaps you have identified a few things about your lifestyle that contributed to the problem.

Perhaps you are a compulsive caregiver. When you are in a room of 10 people, you will give care and support to 9 of them: Everyone except yourself. You may have discovered that you need to start caring for the one person you have left out: You.

Maybe you work too much. You accept duty after duty, project after project, never delegating responsibility and never saying "no." Your work hours steadily expand, crowding out your social life, your family, everything other than the job. One day you simply couldn't take it anymore. Perhaps you have learned that the most valuable workers are those who pace themselves, and that there is more to life than a desk.

Whatever your insights, recognize this: For all the pain it may have given you, that old way of living – that *road* – is familiar. Human beings like familiarity. We are attracted to it. So if you have recently chosen to travel a *new* road, realize that it will be tempting at times to go back to the old one. You may find yourself traveling that old road (working late, caring for the world, being passive) without meaning to do so.

You will need to put up a stop sign on that old road as a reminder to yourself. "*Remember where this road leads.*" When that sign comes up, you will become aware of what you are doing. Having caught yourself, you can choose again to take the new road.

When should this sign appear in your mind? Maybe when you realize you haven't had an hour to yourself in a week. Maybe when you stay at work past seven pm more than two nights in a row. Maybe when you walk through the door of a bar. Maybe when you feel yourself falling for someone exactly like your ex-partner. Maybe when you let an entire meeting pass without saying anything. It depends on the old pattern that you want to change.

Is there a certain aspect of your lifestyle (e.g., overwork, not enough exercise, no time for yourself, bad relationship decisions, drinking too much) that contributed to problems for you? What is it?

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What would be a sign that you were (or might be) sliding back into that pattern? Be as specific as you can (taking one drink, working past nine pm, and so on).

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If you catch yourself doing this again, what would you like to tell yourself? Generally a reminder is the best thing (for example, “*You can’t control everyone’s life,*” “*Remember where this led last time*”).

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What would you like to do instead? Some examples: Call your support buddy, schedule an evening just for you, leave work at quitting time the next day, and so on.

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### **Further Reading on Preventing Relapses**

Bieling, Peter J., & Antony, Martin M. (2003). Ending the Depression Cycle: A Step-By-Step Guide for Preventing Relapse. Oakland CA: New Harbinger Publications. An entire book dedicated to the concept of preventing relapse for people who have had multiple depressive episodes.

## The Mood Emergency Action Plan

Many people who have been through depression and related problems worry about the same thing happening all over again. Sometimes this worry can become so extreme that it threatens to bring on the problem all by itself. At the very least, it can slow down a person's recovery.

Having a plan of action in case your mood worsens can be one way of reducing this worry. And if for some reason the problem *does* return, having a plan can help you get help more quickly and reduce the length and depth of the bad patch. Here are the basics:

**Increase your rewards.** One of the factors that seems to contribute to depression (and, to a lesser extent, anxiety) is a lack of rewarding or pleasurable activities in your life. If your mood declines, it will be important for you to care for yourself. You can do this by increasing the number of rewarding activities as much as possible – even if some things don't seem as much fun as usual. What could you do to build up the enjoyable side of your life if you notice your mood sliding? Try to be specific.

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**Reduce your obligations.** When your mood is declining you are less able to handle a lot of obligations. Feeling overwhelmed by responsibility is not going to help. Like a hot air balloon, you will want to be able to let go of a few sandbags when you feel yourself sinking. Generally you should not get in the habit of dropping your responsibilities very often, but during a significant decline in mood you may need to do so. Some possibilities:

- Agreements with work to scale back tasks or hours if needed.
- Agreements with supporters to provide baby-sitting relief.
- Understanding with family that sometimes you won't be cooking elaborate meals.
- A reserve fund to cover the cost of occasional housecleaning help.

How could you reduce your load in a mood emergency? What would you need to do in advance to make that possible?

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**Get professional help.** The longer a problem goes without attention, the bigger the struggle to get back out of it. You won't want to seek help for every momentary mood dip, but if your mood declines sharply you might need to do so. Some ideas:

- Keep your list of caregivers (your physician(s), therapist, or others) with their phone numbers and addresses in a safe place that is easily accessible.
- Give permission to one or two friends or family members to tell you when you should seek help. Sometimes they can see this better than you can.
- Before you end your contact with a therapist, ask if you can avoid the waiting list and get back into treatment quickly if the need arises.

If things get worse, how could you get professional help more quickly?

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**Get support.** In the event of a major mood decline you will need the support of others. You may just want to talk with them, or you may wish them to do specific things such as taking you to get your groceries. Consult the material on developing a support network (in the Social Life section) for more ideas.

What types of support would be helpful for you in the event of a serious mood problem? How could you arrange for this in advance? Name names.

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**Manage your lifestyle.** One of the things that might contribute to a mood decline would be letting your lifestyle become less healthy. And during the slide itself you might find yourself neglecting your self-care. Based on the section on lifestyle management, which would be the most important things to enhance?

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Remember: If you allow a slide in mood to carry you along, the natural pattern will be to isolate yourself, drop the sustaining elements of your life, and increase your negative automatic thoughts. You need a *plan* to help you reverse this trend.

## Course Review

This program does not change anyone’s life. Instead, we try to give you ideas and skills so that you can change your *own* life to suit you better. At this point you may not be too far along that path. In the past weeks you have been learning *what* to do, and you have been taking a few steps to begin *doing* it. Most of the progress is yet to come, as you put more of the information and skills you have learned into action.

What follows is a list of the basic building blocks for change that have been covered in this program. As you look them over, put a checkmark in the column that best describes your experience with each skill.

- **Now:** You have been working on this and want to continue with it.
- **Next?:** You haven’t tried this yet but are planning to do so.
- **N/A:** Not applicable. This one doesn’t relate to your situation much.

Now	Next? N/A	Skill
_____	_____	<b>Expectations:</b> Knowing and accepting that progress is gradual; understanding that the desire to rush is often part of the problem.
_____	_____	<b>Goal-Setting:</b> Setting Ultimate Goals, breaking them down into Immediate Goals, then carrying out your Immediate Goals one at a time.
_____	_____	<b>Understanding Stress:</b> Knowing what your stressors are and how to reduce the impact of the stress response in your life.
_____	_____	<b>Understanding Depression:</b> Knowing what depression is and how it acts on thoughts, actions, and emotions.
_____	_____	<b>The Sustaining Lifestyle:</b> Diet, physical activity, sleep, caffeine, drugs and alcohol.
_____	_____	<b>Fun:</b> Building enjoyable activities into your everyday life.
_____	_____	<b>The Social Network:</b> Recognizing social contact as a basic need. Taking steps to build your social network or a support team.
_____	_____	<b>Assertiveness:</b> Respecting (and standing up for) your rights as much as you respect others and their rights.
_____	_____	<b>Faulty Assumptions:</b> Recognizing your most common unrealistic beliefs, and catching them when they occur.
_____	_____	<b>Understanding Your Biases:</b> Recognizing and catching your most common ways of distorted thinking.
_____	_____	<b>Challenging Negative Thoughts:</b> Challenging unrealistic negative thoughts and replacing them with more fair and realistic ones.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Stopping or Changing Worry:** Using worry control strategies to increase confidence and restore calm.

\_\_\_\_\_ **The Stress Plan:** Identifying upcoming stressful situations and creating a plan for coping in advance.

\_\_\_\_\_ **The Sign in the Road:** Identifying aspects of your former lifestyle that contributed to the problem, and making a plan for relapses.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Mood Emergency Action Plan:** Developing a plan of positive action to deal with a major setback if one occurs.

## The Do's and Don'ts

The following list summarizes many of the most important points in the manual. As you read it, try to decide which are the most helpful suggestions for you.

### DO

Continue to set achievable goals.

Reward yourself for your achievements.

Simplify or change goals that are not working for you.

Make plans for your free time.

Make contact with friends at least once a week (and preferably much more often).

Make a plan for meeting new friends.

Discuss and share the positive parts of your life with friends.

Be consistent with your daily schedule (e.g., regular bed-times and rising times).

Seek out and initiate pleasant activities and events.

Stay aware of automatic thoughts that affect your mood.

### DON'T

Don't wait for things to happen or change.

Don't focus on disappointments.

Don't get stuck continuing with goals that you find frustrating.

Don't sit around with nothing to do.

Don't isolate yourself when feeling down.

Don't wait for people to approach you.

Don't focus entirely on the negative.

Don't just "float" through your day, letting your mood dictate your schedule.

Don't get stuck in a routine that does not allow you the opportunity to enjoy life.

Don't let negative automatic thoughts go unchallenged.

This list might seem overwhelming. Remember to use what works for *you* and what *you* feel comfortable with. Think of these as part of an action plan of skills you want to develop further.

# ***Congratulations!***

## **You have now completed the Core Program**

...at least, the instructional part of the Core Program.

The program provides information on strategies that have been supported by research as effective methods for improving one's life and state of mind. You will not have had a chance to put them all into action, and many of the techniques take at least several weeks to begin paying off. So although the meetings may be drawing to a close, the road ahead is just beginning.

Over the coming weeks, keep track of your successes and any difficulties you may be experiencing. Keep your participant manual and refer back to it often.

Above all, keep practicing. None of the skills you have learned can get "used up," or become ineffective. Instead, they get more effective the more you use them.

Remember that it is never too late to ask questions or seek out more information. Is there any part of the program that you would like more information about? If so, talk to your fellow participants or your program leader. Most leaders are available to you for information on the materials even after the course is complete.