

PRELIMINARY MBCT HANDOUT

Taken from Segal, Williams, and Teasdale, *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*. (2002) Guilford Press

DEPRESSION

Depression is a very common problem. Twenty percent of adults become severely depressed at some point in their lives. Depression involves both biological changes in the way the brain works and psychological changes – the way we think and feel. Because of this, it is often useful to combine medical treatments for treating depression (which act on the brain) with psychological approaches (which teach new ways to deal with thoughts and feelings).

TREATMENT OF DEPRESSION

When you have been depressed in the past your doctor may have prescribed antidepressants. These work through their effects on the chemical messengers in your brain. In depression, these chemical messengers have often become run down, lowering mood and energy levels, and disturbing sleep and appetite. Correcting these brain chemicals may have taken time, but most people experience improvements in 6 to 8 weeks.

As the depressive episode remits and the mood returns to normal, the negative thinking and body sensations may disappear as well. However the mind has learned an association between these various symptoms. This means that when negative feelings happen again (for any reason) it will tend to trigger all the other symptoms. Consequently there is a significant risk that negative thinking will begin again, become entrenched; and in turn, worsen mood. MBCT helps break the link between negative mood and negative thinking that might escalate into a relapse.

PREVENTION OF MORE DEPRESSION

Whatever caused your depression in the first place, the experience of depression itself has a number of aftereffects. One of these is likelihood that you will become depressed again. The purpose of these classes is to improve your chance of preventing further depression. In the classes, you will learn skills to help you handle your thoughts and feelings differently.

Since many people who have had depression are at risk for further depression, you will learn these skills in a class with up to a dozen other people who have also been depressed. In eight 2-hour sessions, class participants will meet to learn new ways of dealing with what goes on in our minds, and to share and review experiences with class members.

After the eight weekly sessions are over, the class will meet again approximately one month later for a reunion and to see how things are progressing.

HOMEWORK: THE IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICE

Together, we will be working to change patterns of mind that often have been around for a long time. These patterns may have become a habit. We can only expect to succeed in making changes if we put time and effort into learning skills.

This approach depends entirely on your willingness to do homework between class meetings. This homework will take at least an hour a day, 6 days a week, for 8 weeks, and involves tasks such as listening to CDs, performing brief exercises, and so on. We appreciate that it is often very difficult to carve out that amount of time for something new in lives that are already very busy and crowded. However, the commitment to spend time on the homework is an essential part of the class; if you do not feel able to make that commitment, it would be best not to start the classes.

FACING DIFFICULTIES

The classes and the homework assignments can teach you how to be more fully aware and present in each moment of life. The good news is that this makes life more interesting, vivid, and fulfilling. On the other hand, this means facing what is present, even when it is unpleasant and difficult. In practice, you will find that turning to face and acknowledge difficulties is the most effective way, in the long run, to reduce unhappiness. It is also central to preventing further depression. Seeing unpleasant feelings, thoughts, experiences clearly, as they arise, means that you will be in much better shape to “nip them in the bud,” before they progress to more intense or persistent depressions. In the classes, you will learn gentle ways to face difficulties, and will be supported by the instructor and other class members.

PATIENCE AND PERSISTENCE

Because we will be working to change well-established habits of mind, you will be putting in a lot of time and effort. The effects of this effort may only become apparent later. In many ways, it is much like gardening – we have to prepare the ground, plant the seeds, ensure that they are adequately watered and nourished, and then wait patiently for results.

You may be familiar with this pattern from your treatment with antidepressants: Often there is little beneficial effect until you have been taking the medication for some time. Yet improvement in your depression depended on your continuing to take the antidepressant when you felt no immediate benefit.

In the same way, we ask you to approach the classes and the homework with the spirit of patience and persistence, committing yourself to put in the time and the effort into what will be asked of you, while accepting, with patience, that the fruits of your efforts may not show straight away.