What is depression?

What depression is, how it shows up, what keeps it going and what helps.

Everyone feels low sometimes. Depression is when low mood, or a loss of interest in things, lasts for weeks and gets into every part of life. It is one of the most common health problems there is, and it is treatable.

Feelings
Sad, empty, flat or numb. Irritable. Guilty. Hopeless. Little pleasure in things you used to enjoy.

Body
Tired all the time. Sleeping too little or too much. Appetite changes. Slowed down or restless. Aches.

Thinking
Harsh about yourself. Gloomy about the future. Poor concentration and memory. Hard to decide anything.

Behaviour
Doing less. Withdrawing from people. Letting things slide. Staying in bed. Drinking more.

Why it happens

There is rarely one cause. It is usually a mix: difficult events and losses, long-term stress, isolation, physical illness, family history, and patterns of thinking and coping learned early on. Depression is not a sign of weakness or laziness, and you cannot just snap out of it.

How it keeps going

Depression drains energy and motivation, so you do less. Doing less means fewer good moments and more time to dwell. Mood drops further. This cycle is where therapy starts.

What helps

- **Talking therapies.** CBT and other therapies have good evidence.
- **Getting active again**, in small planned steps, before you feel like it.
- **Antidepressant medication**, for some people. Your GP can advise.
- **The basics:** regular sleep, food, movement, daylight and contact with people.

Talk to someone today
if you are having thoughts of harming yourself or that life is not worth living. Tell your GP, your therapist or someone you trust.

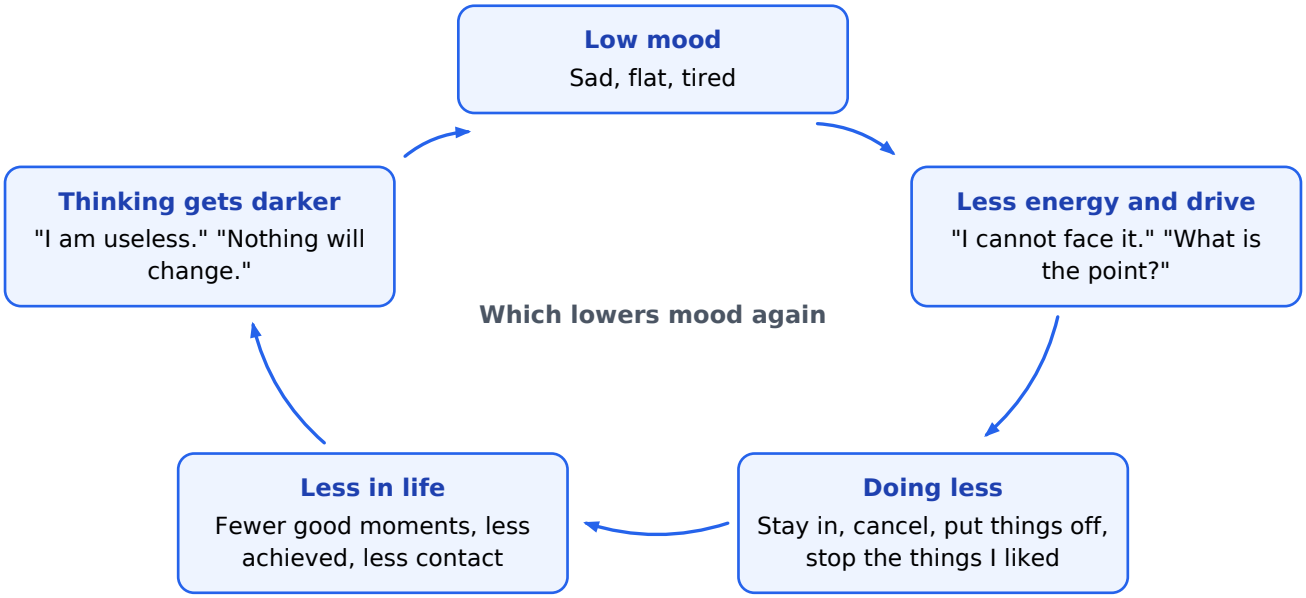
If you need help right now (Ireland)

In an emergency	Call **112** or **999**, or go to your nearest emergency department.
Samaritans	Freephone **116 123**, any time, day or night. Email jo@samaritans.ie
Text About It	Free text **HELLO** to **50808**, any time, for an anonymous text conversation.
Pieta	Freephone **1800 247 247**, any time, or text **HELP** to **51444**. For thoughts of suicide or self-harm.
Your GP	Contact your GP or the out-of-hours GP service in your area.

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

The low mood cycle

How low mood and doing less feed each other, and where to break the cycle.



Each step makes sense

When you feel exhausted and flat, resting and pulling back seem like the obvious thing to do. With a physical illness they would help. With depression they backfire: the less you do, the less there is to lift your mood, and the more time there is for dark thoughts.

Where to break the cycle

You cannot simply decide to feel better, and arguing with your thoughts is hard when your mood is on the floor. Behaviour is different. You can do something small without feeling like it.

1. **Start with what you do.** Add back small activities, on a plan, whatever your mood says.
2. **Mood follows.** Not straight away and not every time, but reliably over a few weeks.
3. **Thinking lifts with it.** After a day with something in it, the bleak thoughts are less convincing.

> **The reverse cycle**
> A little more activity brings a little more achievement, pleasure or contact. That gives a little more energy, which makes the next step easier.

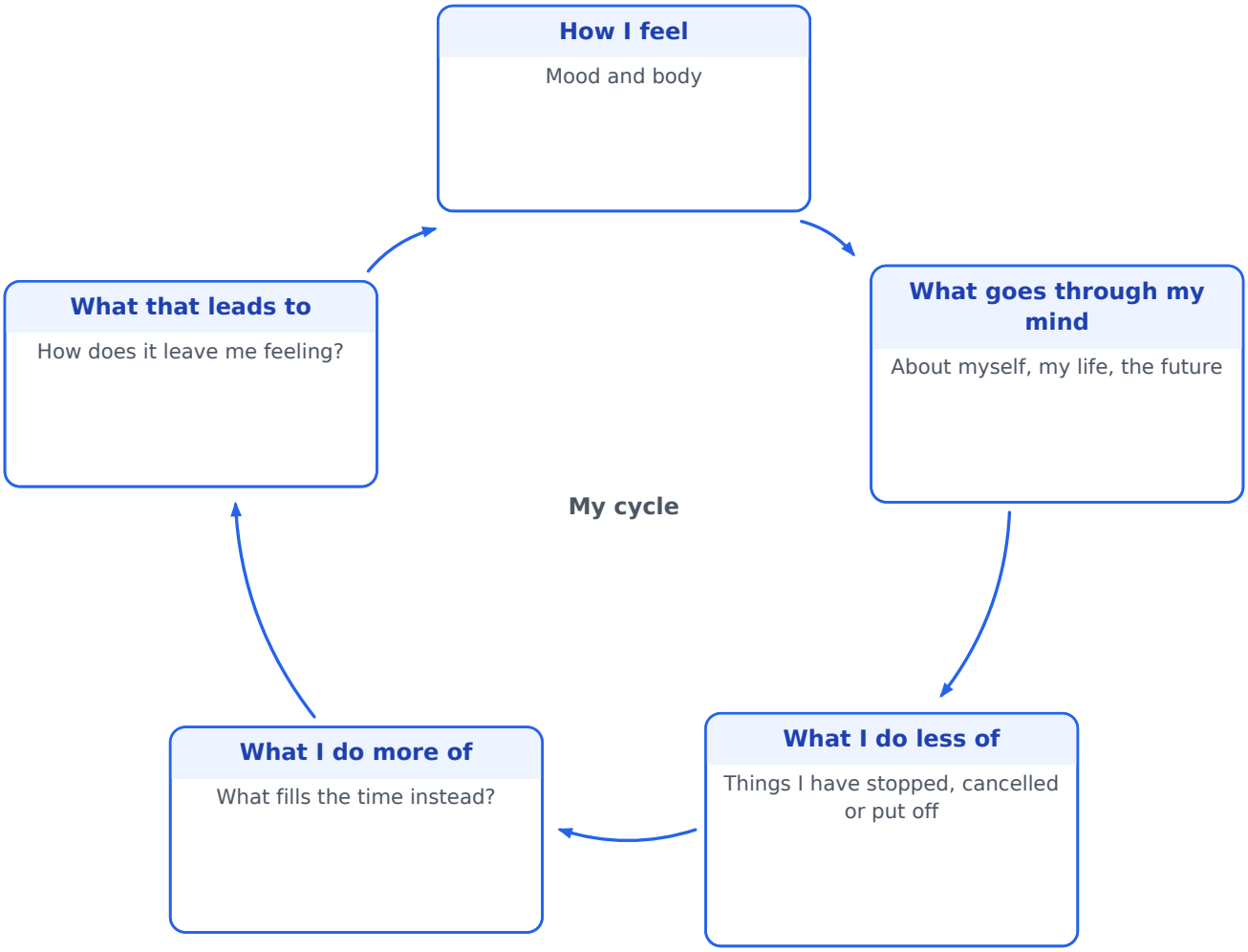
My notes and questions

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

My low mood cycle

Fill in your own version of the cycle.

Name _____ Date _____



Things I used to do that I have let go

The smallest thing I could add back this week

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

Action before motivation

Why acting first works better than waiting until you feel like it.

We usually assume it goes like this: feel motivated, then act. When you are low, motivation does not arrive. If you wait for it, you do less and less.

Usual order
Feel like it, then do it

→

In depression
The feeling does not come

→

What works
Do it first. The feeling follows.

Working from the outside in

- **Follow the plan, not the mood.** Decide in advance what you will do and when. Then do it because it is 11 o'clock, not because you feel up to it.
- **Start smaller than seems worth it.** Five minutes of a walk. One dish washed. One text sent.
- **Expect little at first.** Things may feel flat or pointless. Do them anyway. Pleasure and energy come back with repetition, usually later than you would like.
- **Count the effort.** When you are low, getting dressed can be a real achievement. Judge by how hard it was, not by what you used to manage.

Three kinds of activity to include

Achievement
Things that give a sense of having done something: a chore, a form, a task at work.

Closeness
Things that connect you with others: a text, a coffee, a chat over the wall.

Enjoyment
Things that used to give pleasure, or might: music, a bath, a walk, a match on TV.

What to expect

Some days it will help and some days it will not. Look at the trend over two or three weeks, not at any single day.

> **Tell yourself**
> "I do not have to feel like it. I only have to start."

My notes and questions

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

Activity diary

A week of what you actually do, in two-hour blocks.

Name _____ Date _____

In each box, write a few words about what you were doing and rate your mood from 0 (very low) to 10 (very good). Fill it in as you go, or at lunchtime and bedtime.

Time	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
6 to 8am							
8 to 10am							
10am to 12							
12 to 2pm							
2 to 4pm							
4 to 6pm							
6 to 8pm							
8 to 10pm							
10pm to 12							

At the end of the week, look for patterns. When was mood a little higher? What were you doing, and who were you with?

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

Activity ideas

A list of activities to choose from when you cannot think of any.

Tick anything you could imagine doing, even if you do not feel like it now. Aim to have some from each group in your week.

Achievement

- [ ] Make the bed
- [ ] Clear one surface
- [ ] Deal with one piece of post
- [ ] Do a wash
- [ ] Cook something simple
- [ ] Pay a bill or make a call I have put off
- [ ] Fix or tidy one small thing
- [ ] Do 15 minutes on a task at work

Closeness

- [ ] Text someone to say hello
- [ ] Ring a friend or relative
- [ ] Have a cup of tea with someone
- [ ] Say yes to an invitation
- [ ] Chat to a neighbour or shop assistant
- [ ] Do something kind for someone
- [ ] Play with the kids or the dog
- [ ] Go along to a group, club or class

Enjoyment

- [ ] Listen to music I love
- [ ] Watch a film or a match
- [ ] Read a few pages
- [ ] Have a long shower or bath
- [ ] Sit in the sun or by a window
- [ ] Cook or order a favourite meal
- [ ] Do something creative
- [ ] Potter in the garden

Body and outdoors

- [ ] Walk round the block
- [ ] Stretch for five minutes
- [ ] Go to the sea, a park or the hills
- [ ] Swim, cycle or kick a ball
- [ ] Do some gentle exercise at home
- [ ] Get outside before noon

Other ideas

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

Planning my week

Plan the week ahead so you have something to follow whatever your mood.

Name _____ Date _____

Plan one or two things for each part of the day. Keep them small and specific (what, where, with whom). Include something for achievement, something for closeness and something for enjoyment most days. Tick each one when it is done.

Day	Morning	Afternoon	Evening
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			
Sat			
Sun			

What might get in the way this week, and what will I do about it?

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

The five-minute start

A way to get started on a task you keep putting off.

When something feels too big, commit to less. Agree to do it for five minutes. You are not agreeing to finish it.

1. **Pick one task.** Just one.
2. **Decide the very first physical action.** Not "sort the kitchen". "Put the cups in the sink."
3. **Set a timer for five minutes.**
4. **Start.** Do only that task until the timer goes.
5. **Then choose.** Stop, with no guilt. Or carry on for another five.

Why it works

- Starting is the hardest part. Once you are moving, continuing takes far less effort.
- Five minutes is too small for your mind to argue with.
- Stopping after five minutes still counts. You did what you said you would.

Task	First action	Did I start?	Did I carry on?	How I felt afterwards

On the worst days, make it two minutes.

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

Understanding rumination

What rumination is, how to tell it from problem solving, and ways to stop.

Rumination is going round the same thoughts again and again: why did this happen, what is wrong with me, why can I not just get on with things. It feels as if you are working something out. In fact you finish each round feeling worse and no further on.

Rumination

- Asks "why?"
- Abstract and general
- Goes round in circles
- Focuses on what is wrong with me
- Leaves me lower and stuck

Useful thinking

- Asks "how?" and "what next?"
- Specific and concrete
- Moves towards a decision
- Focuses on what I can do
- Leaves me with a next step

Why we do it

It seems as if understanding the problem should fix it. It can feel irresponsible not to think about it. And when mood is low, the mind keeps going back to dark topics.

The two-minute test

After a couple of minutes of thinking something over, ask:

1. Have I made any progress towards solving a problem?
2. Do I understand something now that I did not before?
3. Do I feel any less self-critical or low?

If it is no to all three, you are ruminating.

Ways out

- **Name it.** "I am ruminating."
- **Change "why" to "how".** From "Why am I like this?" to "How can I make the next hour a bit better?"
- **Get specific.** What exactly happened? What is the first small thing I could do?
- **Move.** Change rooms, go outside, do something with your hands.
- **Absorb yourself.** Pick something that needs your attention: a task, a conversation, a puzzle.
- **Notice your danger times.** In bed, in the shower, on the commute. Plan something for them.

> **Note**
> You cannot stop the thoughts arriving. You can choose not to keep going over them.

My notes and questions

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

Three good things

Each evening, write down three things that went well and why.

Name _____ Date _____

Low mood trains the mind to scan for what went wrong. This exercise trains it the other way. Each evening, write three things that went well today, or that you are glad of, and why they happened. They can be small: a good cup of coffee, a kind word, getting something done.

Day	Three things that went well	Why did they happen?
Mon		
Tue		
Wed		
Thu		
Fri		
Sat		
Sun		

It can feel forced at first. Keep going for the full week before you judge it.

From research by Martin Seligman and colleagues (2005).

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

Staying well: my early warning plan

Your early signs of a dip in mood, and what to do when you notice them.

Name _____ Date _____

Green: when I am well

What I am doing, how I sleep, who I see. What keeps me here.

Amber: early warning signs

The first changes I or others notice in my mood, thinking, sleep and behaviour.

Red: I am struggling

Signs that things have slipped a long way.

When I notice amber signs, I will...

- [ ] Back to my routine
- [ ] Plan each day
- [ ] See or ring someone
- [ ] Use my tools

When I notice red signs, I will...

- [ ] Tell someone I trust
- [ ] Contact my GP
- [ ] Contact my therapist

Situations that might set off a dip

People I have asked to tell me if they notice changes, and how to reach them

What I want to remember about how I got better last time

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.