Module 6
Change your thinking

Changing the attitudes and patterns of thinking that maintain depression is one of the most effective longer-term strategies for overcoming depression and building resistance to its return. The strategies covered in this section are based on the techniques of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) which has a strong evidence base as an effective therapy for both anxiety and depression.

Contents

1. Challenging my depressed thinking
2. Modifying my stress levels
3. Managing anxiety and anger
4. Learning self-compassion
Challenging my depressed thinking

Our thoughts have a very powerful effect on our feelings and behaviour. There are many common negative thinking habits which help depression to flourish, and which are also reinforced by depression. Knowing how your habitual ways of thinking might be affecting your mood is an important tool for tackling depression.

1. Understand types of depressed thinking

Use the list to tick which types of depressed thinking you recognise in yourself. Write down a specific example of each type of thinking which is relevant to you, if you can think of one:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of depressed thinking</th>
<th>Yes/No?</th>
<th>My own example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tunnel vision eg. “There is nothing good in my life whatsoever.”</td>
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<td>All-or-nothing thinking eg. “If I’m not part of the in group then I’m a loser.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Over-generalisation eg. (After a break-up) “No one will ever love me. I’ll never find someone else.”</td>
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<td>Jumping to conclusions eg. “She ignored me so she must hate me.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control freakery eg. “If I’m not in total control then everything is unacceptably out of control.”</td>
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<td>Perfectionism eg. “If I don’t come top of the class, I’m a failure.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thoughts about death or suicide eg. “The only way I can fix this is to end my life.”</td>
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<td>Emotional reasoning eg. “I feel so bad that I must be bad.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoidance-justification eg. “No one will talk to me so I might as well not go.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Superstitious thinking eg. “If I let myself hope for a 1st I won’t get one.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disappointment ‘insurance’ eg. “I expect the worst so I won’t be disappointed.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cynicism eg. “There’s no point investing hope or energy in anything because the world always lets you down.”</td>
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</table>
2. Identify your own forms of depressed thinking

Spend a day or a week ‘tuning in’ to your own internal running commentary. Use copies of the attached ‘Thought Diary’ to write down what you learn about your own habits of depressed thinking.

3. Challenge your depressed thinking

Challenging depressed thinking is about becoming a detective to find evidence to test the validity of your beliefs, and then using reasoning skills to modify them and develop more helpful attitudes in their place.

It is a very powerful way to change your depressed feelings and behaviour. Use the second section on the Thought Diary to work through the thoughts you have identified. Make more copies of the Thought Diary and Thought Challenging form to keep using this strategy whenever you have a difficult experience or find that your mood has been affected.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>A = Activating Event</strong></th>
<th><strong>C = Consequences</strong></th>
<th><strong>B = Beliefs</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What happened?</strong></td>
<td><strong>What did I do?</strong></td>
<td><strong>What was I thinking before, during and after the event?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(give a brief description, with date and time)</td>
<td><strong>What feelings did I have?</strong></td>
<td>(list all the thoughts you can think of, asking yourself why you thought it and what was bad about that and what it says about you)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example:</td>
<td>(rate the intensity of each feeling from 0 to 10, and underline the one that is most intense)</td>
<td><strong>now underline the thought that is most associated with the feeling that you rated as most intense)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday, 6 Nov,</td>
<td>I went quiet and then skipped the next lecture and went home instead.</td>
<td><strong>Oh no, I'm so dumb. My lecturer probably thinks I'm not worth much. If I keep getting marks like this I won't get a good degree. My parents are going to be disappointed in me. I don't understand what I did wrong. I'm obviously not clever enough to be at uni. I can't manage.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I got my essay back with a lower mark than I had hoped for.</td>
<td>I felt numb, a bit sick, tearful, disappointed, panicky, overwhelmed.</td>
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</table>
**Challenge depressed thinking**

Ask yourself:

1. Is this an example of a type of depressed thinking? If so, what?
2. What’s the evidence for this perspective?
3. What evidence is there for a different point of view?
4. How did I get into the habit of thinking this way?
5. What other explanations could there be?
6. How realistic are my expectations and beliefs?
7. Is it helpful for me to see things this way?
8. What would be a more positive way to see this?
9. What would I say to a friend who was thinking this way?

Example:

1. Yes. Tunnel vision. Jumping to conclusions.
2. I got a disappointing mark for this essay when I thought I had done well.
3. I got good marks for the previous essay. My teachers said I was clever enough for uni.
4. I used to be called thick at school before they realised I had dyslexia.
5. Maybe I just didn’t read the question clearly enough.
6. It’s still very early in the course and the topic is very new to me. The mark won’t even count to my final degree.
7. No! It’s an unhelpful thought. It makes me want to give up.
8. It’s a learning experience. I can ask the tutor to explain where I went wrong so I’ll do better next time.
9. Cheer up – it’s all part of the learning experience. Let’s take some time off and do something fun tonight and get back on track with work in the morning.

Work out your own example here:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Now see if you can replace the ‘hot thought’ (the one you underlined in B) with a more balanced, helpful belief. Write it down here:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>eg: It’s a learning experience. I can ask the tutor to explain where I went wrong so I’ll do better next time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Re-rate the feeling that you underlined in C:

| eg. How panicky am I now? 3 |
| Write your rating here: |

Give the thought a label

Eg. The old ‘I’m not clever enough’ thought

This helps you recognize it as an unhelpful thought and either replace it with your more helpful thought or just ‘let it go’
1. Planning and time management

Basic planning and time management is vital for managing stress levels effectively. Make sure you have realistic expectations about the amount of work you can manage in a day.

If you don’t already have a good quality planner or diary then make a commitment now to get one and use it effectively. Use the list to tick off the steps taken to get your life better planned:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps to a better organised life</th>
<th>Tick</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I own a suitable diary and/or planner with enough space for all my commitments to be listed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have recorded all my study commitments (lectures, tutorials etc) and deadlines in it.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I have planned out each week (or the next few weeks if your timetable changes a lot each week)</td>
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<tr>
<td>giving realistic blocks of time for study, paid work (if relevant), exercise, leisure and social time etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have marked when to make a start on each assignment and divided up my study time over the next few weeks to allow all my deadlines to be met</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have given myself a specific small ‘starting step’ for each assignment</td>
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</table>

Add your own planning goals below:
2. Problem solving

Not all difficulties and stresses can be solved through planning – and plans don’t always get followed to the letter. If you are stressed or worried about a real, current problem then use the problem-solving framework at the end of this worksheet to find and implement practical solutions.

The first step is to identify any problems, rather than sticking your head in the sand.

Problems I am facing at the moment are:
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3. Challenging unhelpful thinking

Before you start working on practical solutions for your problems, check that you are not making things worse with depressed thinking habits like control freakery or self-bullying:

- Use the attached Thought Diary to identify Beliefs and Consequences that arise around the problems you have listed (see more about how to do this in the ‘Challenging my depressed thinking’ worksheet).
- Use the Thought Challenging section of the diary to work out a balanced and constructive description of each problem you are facing.
- Now use the attached Problem-solving Framework to identify and implement possible solutions.

“I would recommend learning about what one can and cannot control, and realising how one can only control oneself and not others.” – Joshua
1. Identify the problem clearly and specifically:
The electricity bill is much higher than expected and I don't have enough money to pay my share – it's the last straw, because I'm really struggling to make ends meet.

2. Make a list of all possible solutions, including those you don't like:
- go and see the bank to arrange an overdraft extension,
- ask my parents/housemates for a loan,
- do some extra shifts at work to make up the difference,
- take on an extra shift each week,
- see Student Finance for advice and a possible hardship loan,
- look at where else I can save money e.g. don't go out for a few weeks,
- pick a fight with my housemates because they're the ones who keep leaving the lights on etc

3. Cross out the ones that are unreasonable or undesirable
- pick a fight with my housemates because they're the ones who keep leaving the lights on etc (will just make things worse)
- take on an extra shift each week (I'm already squeezed for time to get my uni work done)

4. Put the remaining ones in order of preference and evaluate the top 3 or 4 for their pros and cons:
1. Ask my parents (not my housemates) for a loan
   Cons: I know they're also struggling financially
   Pros: They've said they'll try and help if necessary

2. Do some extra shifts at work to make up the difference
   Cons: I might have to miss out on the night out my mates and I had planned (but that'll also save me some money!)
   Pros: A couple of extra shifts this week and next week should cover it

3. See Student Finance for advice and a hardship loan
   Cons: I feel embarrassed. I'm scared they'll just see me as another skint student who hasn't managed their finances properly
   Pros: They're there to give advice and there's no harm in asking for a loan. I could probably do with some advice about how to manage things better.

4. Look where else I can save money e.g. not going out for a few weeks
   Cons: I need to have some 'down time' too and I don't want to miss out socially
   Pros: I could probably do with easing up on the drinking anyway. Maybe I could compromise and join them for a few drinks, but not go on to the club?

5. Decide on a plan and implement it. Evaluate and return to previous steps if it hasn't helped.
   I'm going to do all four things - I'll ask my parents for a loan, but then pay them back by doing extra shifts for a couple of weeks and saving up by pulling back a little on nights out. I'll also go and get some advice from the Student Finance office and see what I can do to budget better in future.
   One month later: That's sorted it and I'm managing things better now.
1. Identify the problem clearly and specifically:

2. Make a list of all possible solutions, including those you don't like:

3. Cross out the ones that are unreasonable or undesirable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4. Put the remaining ones in order of preference and evaluate the top 3 or 4 for their pros and cons:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Cons: Pros:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Cons: Pros:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Cons: Pros:</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Cons: Pros:</td>
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</table>

5. Decide on a plan and implement it. Evaluate and return to previous steps if it hasn't helped.
1. Changing your attitude towards control

Unhelpful anxiety and anger spirals arise mainly from the kinds of depressed thinking which focus on imposing unrealistic control over life – such as control freakery, rule-bound thinking, catastrophising, hyper-vigilance and avoidance. Learning a new attitude towards the idea of 'control' is essential for addressing anxiety and anger problems, as well as depression.

☐ Make a list of your most important ‘shoulds’ and ‘oughts’ about life in general and your own life in particular. To help identify these, ask yourself what kinds of things make you annoyed with yourself or others, or what kinds of things upset you if they don’t work out.

(eg. “I mustn’t make mistakes,” “I must do well,” “I shouldn’t have to ask for help,” “I need to be in control,” “I shouldn’t ever let anyone else down,” etc)

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☐ Now re-write these in the form of preferences instead of demands:

(eg. “It’s not a good feeling making mistakes, but it’s not the end of the world”, “I would very much like to do well, but my worth as a person doesn’t depend on how well I do”, “It can feel difficult to ask for help, but it is part of being human to give and receive help and support,” “I like feeling in control, but when I try too hard to control things it can make things worse – I will take a more realistic attitude to what can be controlled and what can’t,” “I would like to be dependable for others, but I also need to take care of my own needs,” etc)
2. Facing your fears

A very important strategy for reducing chronic anxiety as well as depression is to tackle the avoidance behaviour which contributes so much to it spiralling out of control. By planning this carefully and doing it in small manageable steps you give yourself the opportunity to build up your ‘anxiety immunity’.

☐ Make a list of your daily fears and the things you are avoiding. Include small things as well as big ones.

See ‘Taking care of yourself’ in the Self-help First Steps section for self-soothing ideas to add to your list. At the top of your list should be ‘Take a few deep breaths’ because deep breathing and relaxation techniques intervene directly into the anxiety/anger spiral at a physiological level (see the Practising relaxation page for more).

Make sure you are properly supported. Either ask a friend or get professional support especially when facing the more difficult things on your list.

□ Make a list of ways you can soothe and help yourself when things don’t work out the way you’d like them to: (eg. taking a few deep breaths and practising my relaxation techniques, speaking kindly to myself and acknowledging the disappointment, giving myself a treat like a long soak in the bath with a book, calling up a friend for a chat etc)

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□ Go back over the list and grade it in order of difficulty, with the least difficult as number 1.

□ Write down the fear/avoidance labelled at number 1 on your list (ie the least challenging one) here, then use the following steps to address it:
(eg. “I’m avoiding checking my bank account because I think I might have gone over my overdraft.”)

□ What is the worst thing that could happen? How likely is this?
(eg. I find I have gone into overdraft and have had lots of extra charges - it’s quite likely I’ve gone into overdraft, but probably not got too many charges yet.)

□ What practical things can you do to deal with this? Use the Problem-solving Framework to generate and evaluate practical solutions.
(eg. I can use the problem-solving framework to think of solutions and stop myself from building up more charges.)

□ Notice what depressed thinking habits are getting in your way and use the Thought Challenging form to challenge them
(eg. I’m scared the charges will have mounted up and I’ll never be able to get back on track – catastrophising, all-or-nothing thinking)
Move on to the next thing on your list. If necessary, break the task down into smaller steps and do the easiest thing first. Make sure you have practised techniques to help you manage any difficult feelings that may come up, such as deep breathing and other self-soothing strategies.

3. Acknowledging and working with your anger

Go through the same process for identifying the things that make you angry. Anger is an important emotion that helps us protect or stand up for ourselves when necessary. Denying or suppressing anger can lead to problems with aggression, but it can also be diverted into anxiety and/or depression. We need to be able to acknowledge and harness our anger to solve problems constructively.

Acknowledging and accepting your anger is an important first step. Then by identifying what you can and can’t control in situations you can make more helpful choices about how to channel and manage your anger, when it arises.

☐ Make a list of the things that make you angry at the moment.

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☐ Go back over the list and grade it in order of importance, with the least important/annoying as number 1.

☐ Write down the number 1 anger point on your list and use the following steps to address it:
(eg, “It gets me really annoyed when my housemates don’t do the washing up.”)
□ What can and can’t you control in the situation?
(eg. I can’t control whether or not my housemates do the washing up. I can control how I respond when they don’t do the washing up and how I communicate my feelings about it.)

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□ Use the Thought Diary to notice if there are any depressed thinking habits fuelling your anger, especially any related to ‘control freakery’ or the sense that you need to be able to control things unrealistically. List them here:
(eg. They are doing it because they don’t respect me – over-personalisation. Everyone must do their equal share in the house – rule-bound thinking. They’ve just finished supper, so I’m going to check whether they’re doing the washing up or not – hyper-vigilance)

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□ Use the Thought Challenging form to replace these thoughts with more balanced, constructive evaluations.
(eg. “They probably don’t realise how much it annoys me because they are less bothered about tidiness than I am. I’d really like everyone to put as much effort into keeping things tidy as I do, but I can’t force anyone to do so. Constantly checking up on whether they’ve done it or not is just winding me up even more, so it would be better if I tried to ignore it for a while.”)

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What practical steps can you take to address the situation? Use the Problem-solving Framework to help you identify a range of ideas and strategies.

(eg. I can plan out how to let my housemates know how I’m feeling and ask them if we could set up a rota for keeping the kitchen tidy. Or I could offer to tidy up the kitchen if they take on some of the other tasks that stress me out like paying the bills or dealing with the landlord.)

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If the situation is completely out of my control and there is nothing else I can do practically, then what can I do to help myself with my anger?

(eg. If my housemates still don’t bother and won’t work with me on a mutual solution then I can: – decide that I will do the washing up myself anyway, because it’s more stressful to live than the mess than with the resentment for doing all the tidying, - acknowledge my anger and give myself sympathy for it, - go out for a vigorous run when I feel myself building up a head of steam etc.)

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Remember to get support, especially when you are working on the more difficult issues. It can be really helpful to ‘sound out’ your ideas with someone else to get a different perspective on the things that make you angry. Your uni or college counselling service may have workshops on Anger Management as well as Assertiveness to help you build on these skills.
Repeat these steps with the other anger points on your list.

Use some of the specific ideas you come up with to make yourself a general Anger Plan which you can remind yourself of when new anger issues come up.

4. Making an anger plan

Example:
1. As soon as I notice my anger building, I will ___ step away from the situation for a moment, if possible, or take a few deep breaths, if not ___.

2. To help me deal with my anger in that moment, I will ___ remind myself to take a few deep breaths and think before I act ___.

3. I will take time to ___ think through exactly what I am feeling angry about and whether there is anything I have control over in the situation ___.

4. If there is something constructive I can do in the situation, I will ___ plan in my head what I want to say and remind myself to speak calmly and assertively ___.

5. If there is nothing I can immediately do to improve the situation, I will ___ acknowledge my frustration and recognise its legitimacy; promise myself I will take time later to help myself with these feelings ___.

6. If I still feel angry later, I will ___ go for a run or do some other vigorous activity to 'let off steam' ___.

7. In order to help myself with similar situations in the future, I will ___ use the step-by-step plan above to help me work out what to do ___.

My Anger Plan:

1. As soon as I notice my anger building, I will ___

2. To help me deal with my anger in that moment, I will ___

3. I will take time to ___
4. If there is something constructive I can do in the situation, I will
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5. If there is nothing I can immediately do to improve the situation, I will
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6. If I still feel angry later, I will
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7. In order to help myself with similar situations in the future, I will
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“My counsellor helped me to see how to use all my bottled up anger in constructive ways. I control it now by going out for a run or to the gym. Even, God forbid, doing some work! I cleaned our flat from top to bottom the other week, and my flatmate asked what the **** I was doing!” – Darren
Learning self-compassion

Self-compassion is the attitude that underpins all other depression-beating strategies. If we can learn to treat ourselves kindly and support ourselves though our struggles then everything else becomes a lot easier!

Are you your own worst enemy? It is very rare for depression to exist without a certain amount of ‘self-bullying’. Depression is a bully, and it preys on and reinforces the habit of self-bullying. To beat depression you need to sort your inner bully out!

Self-compassion is a skill that you can learn and practise without having to ‘believe’ it first – we can train our minds to bring greater compassion to all our thoughts and feelings.

1. Tune in

First you need to notice how self-bullying you can be, because often we do this without even realising it. Spend a day or a week writing down some of the things you say to yourself as part of your inner running commentary when you are feeling low. Just write it all down exactly the way you speak to yourself, with the words you use – the name-calling, the self-blame, the criticism of specific things that you do etc. Also make a note of the tone that you use with yourself. It might be interesting to hear if you sound like anyone in your past (a critical parent or teacher, for example)?

Write down the most common phrases below:
(eg. “Idiot! Why did you do that?” “You’re always getting it wrong” “What a loser” “Stop being such a lazy cow.” “That’s pathetic” etc)

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2. Evaluate

Now look back over what you have written and think about whether you would ever speak this way to someone else that you cared about, like a friend? Especially if that person was feeling low? It’s unlikely!

You may feel that your critical voice is trying to ‘help’ you – to keep you safe or help you improve as a person – but it is important to recognise how ineffective it is to do this in a harsh, self-critical way. Being caring and encouraging in your tone is much more effective...
3. Try something different

See if you can change the tone and words to how you might say it to a friend you cared about, or else imagine how your ‘guardian angel’ might speak to you – someone who really cares about you and accepts you and is always kind and gentle to you. Practise by writing it out here. It may feel very strange at first if you are used to taking a harsh tone with yourself:
(eg. “Bad luck mate! That must have been a bit embarrassing for you. Never mind, everyone makes mistakes sometimes.” “You’re really tired, aren’t you? Are you up to making a start on work now, or do you need a bit of a rest first?” “I can see you’re feeling really down at the moment. Poor you. Looks like you need a hug!”)
4. Keep a self-compassion journal

Another way to extend this exercise is described by the leading US self-compassion researcher, Dr Kristin Neff, who suggests keeping a ‘self-compassion journal’ for a week (or longer) in which you write down the things in your day that have caused you pain, that you felt unhappy about, or that you judged yourself for, and then to use her 3 components of self-compassion to process the event:

1. **Mindfulness:** Bring your feelings to your awareness, trying to be accepting and non-judgemental, just describing the feelings without either overstating or understating them.
   
   eg. I felt embarrassed and uncomfortable when the tutor asked me a question in the seminar and I didn’t know the answer. I went red and stammered. Then I felt more and more anxious and in the end I said I needed to go to the loo and left early.

2. **Common humanity:** Now write down how your experience connects to imperfection and shared pain of the human condition.
   
   eg. Anyone else would have felt embarrassed and awkward as well – there were probably lots of others in the seminar who didn’t know the answer and I was just the unlucky one who got asked! There’ve been so many essay deadlines lately that lots of us have found it difficult to prepare properly for seminars – it’s not just me.

3. **Self-kindness:** Then write yourself some kind, understanding words of comfort using a gentle and reassuring tone.
   
   Poor you – that was bad luck. It’s not nice to get shown up in public like that and it’s not surprising you felt embarrassed and awkward. You didn’t need to be so hard on yourself about getting red and stammering. Maybe next time you can remember to be kinder to yourself and then you won’t get so anxious afterwards.

5. **Next steps**

Find a self-compassion test, more self-compassion training exercises, and some mp3 downloads with self-compassion meditations on Dr Kristin Neff’s website at www.self-compassion.org

A very good way to develop more self-compassion is learning the skill of mindfulness – learn more on the ‘Practising mindfulness’ page of the website and look out for courses or workshops run by your uni or college counselling service.