Why me, why now?

There isn't usually one simple straightforward cause for depression. Quite often it feels as if there is no good reason for it – but this does not mean that it has struck randomly.

This worksheet will help you consider some of the complex, interacting factors, unique to you, which may have played a role in making you vulnerable to depression. You will also be able to consider any relevant triggers for a specific episode of depression.

Considering and understanding these factors in greater depth may be easier with the help of a trained professional, such as a counsellor (See also 'Counsellors & doctors')

1. Depression vulnerability

***"I think depression is biological because it runs in my family, but I don't think you can underestimate how certain events can affect you. I just dismissed things like bullying as a cause, but actually they can shape your world."* – Megan**

1. My depression biology

Brain chemicals called neurotransmitters are responsible for regulating our moods. Which (if any) of the following factors affecting neurotransmitters might be relevant in my life?

☐ **Genetics**

Am I aware of any depression or other mental health problems in my immediate or wider blood relatives? (Note that this is only a rough indicator – there is no way currently to test for a genetic vulnerability to depression.)

☐ **Early experiences**

Did I experience significant trauma, neglect, abandonment, abuse as a baby or very young child? (Note that early experiences also have psychological effects – see next section.)

☐ **Hormones**

Am I aware of any hormonal issues or conditions that may contribute to mood problems? (eg. pregnancy, breastfeeding, polycystic ovary syndrome, chronic fatigue syndrome, glandular fever, diabetes, thyroid problems)

☐ **Blood sugar**

Do I eat a balanced diet, with regular meals and snacks? Am I aware of any connection between what I eat and my mood?

☐ **Stress**

What stress factors are there in my life? Are my current coping strategies helping me to manage the stress in my life or not? Do I have any symptoms of 'chronic stress'?

Write down specific examples of the above factors here:

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2. My depression psychology

Do I feel 'not good enough' in some way? Do I know what may have led to me feeling this way about myself? Which, if any, of the following types of experience are relevant to my experience?

☐ Bad treatment by carers

Have I been badly treated in childhood by parents or carers – have I experienced abuse, neglect, chronic lack of affection and/or criticism?

☐ Insufficient care

Has there been a failure in provision of the basic attention, security and care I needed to receive as a child eg. as a result of parental illness or other incapacity, parents' own emotional problems, parental divorce or relationship difficulty?

☐ Conditional love or approval/acceptance

Have I experienced disapproval or rejection? Does it feel as if my self-worth is dependent on my 'performance', in some way? Does it feel as if 'failure' would be catastrophic to me?

***"I just felt like I was a horrible person if my dad could be that way with me – call me stupid and things like that and laugh at me. I felt really unlovable."* – Sarah**

☐ Bullying

Have I experienced bullying or bad treatment at any stage by others besides parents/carers? Did I receive adequate support or help to address or stop it?

☐ 'Difference' or lack of acceptance

Have I felt, or been made to feel, painfully 'different' from others?
Have I experienced negative effects for this difference? (see also Depression sociology)

☐ Other

Are there other experiences which have contributed to low self-worth or feeling 'not good enough'?

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It may feel helpful to write down specific examples of any of the above experiences. The reason experiences like this are important to identify is that they often become internalised as 'evidence' about our self-worth, leading to unfair self-blame or low self-esteem. Understanding why we have come to think this way about ourselves is an important first step towards changing our attitude towards ourselves – the next step is to learn how to offer ourselves compassion and care instead of criticism and self-blame.

Acknowledging and writing down such experiences may feel very difficult and painful - considering these issues with a counsellor may give you the appropriate support for a more in-depth consideration of these factors, as well as offering a way to work towards 'healing' of the damage caused to you by life experiences.

3. My depression sociology

Social circumstances play a significant role in vulnerability to depression. Which of the following social factors might be contributing to my depression?

☐ Isolation

Am I suffering from loneliness or lack of sufficient meaningful connection? Have my friendships been disrupted in some way (eg. due to leaving home and starting at uni)?

☐ Prejudice or discrimination

Have I experienced prejudice or discrimination due to unhelpful social or cultural attitudes (eg racism or homophobia)?

***"I wouldn't change that I am gay, but growing up in a homophobic environment it's kind of been forced into my head that being gay is wrong so being gay I feel wrong a lot of the time."* – Craig**

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☐ **Poverty or financial stress**
Am I experiencing financial stress? Do I have appropriate support/coping strategies in place to help me deal with this financial stress?

☐ **Chronic stress/helplessness**
Do I have adequate support and/or coping strategies to deal with the stress in my life currently? Or do I feel out of control?

☐ **Social comparison**
Are my own goals and attitudes to myself affected by unrealistic social norms around 'success', 'attractiveness' etc? Do I impose perfectionist standards on myself to try to meet these goals?

☐ **Lack of support**
Is something stopping me from accessing appropriate support – either inadequacy of support provision and/or resistance in myself to seeking support (perhaps through unhelpful social attitudes about 'dependence' vs 'independence')?

☐ **Cynicism/lack of meaning**
Have I lost sight of what is really important to me – what gives life meaning and offers real happiness?
How much choice I have I exercised in considering the values and goals I sign up to?

It may feel helpful to write down specific examples of any of the above factors. It is important to recognise that many of the factors making you vulnerable to depression are not specific to you – that depression is a growing problem in our world and therefore cannot be seen as 'your fault'.

Although we cannot change many aspects of our social context and social circumstances, we do not have to passively accept dominant social norms – we can critically examine the values of our society and choose to reject or resist those values which are damaging or unhelpful for us. See more on this in the 'Wider perspectives' section

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4. Depression triggers

Are there any recent circumstances which may have played a role in setting off a downward spiral into depression, for me?

☐ Traumatic event or loss

Have I experienced a traumatic event, or a loss such as a bereavement of relationship break up, which has temporarily overwhelmed my coping resources?

☐ Major change in circumstances

Have I been having difficulty adapting to new circumstances in my life? Are my coping resources feeling inadequate to address the stresses and challenges of my new situation?

A normal grief/loss response will often include periods of very low mood which should not be seen as problematic or dysfunctional - however, a loss can trigger more wide-reaching depression where there is existing vulnerability to depression

☐ Experience of failure or fear of failure

Am I facing failure, or fearing failure, in a way which is important to me?

☐ Illness or other withdrawal from normal activity

Has something caused me to experience an enforced period of withdrawal from meaningful tasks and/or a sense of purpose and engagement (eg illness, unemployment/retirement, long vacation period)?

☐ Isolation or social withdrawal

Have I become cut off from social support and interaction? Eg. has it been difficult to make new friends in a new situation?

☐ Disruption to basic daily routines

Is my lifestyle conducive to my emotional wellbeing? Have I been experiencing disrupted or unhealthy patterns of sleep, eating, exercise, substance use, work etc?

☐ Other

What other possible triggers can I identify which may have contributed or be contributing to my depression?

It may be useful to write down specific examples for each of the relevant factors, as well as identifying the ways in which your daily functioning is being affected by depression. This helps target the areas which it would be most useful to address when choosing strategies to tackle your depression:

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A trigger is not the same as a 'cause'. Because depression works in a self-reinforcing downward spiral of several interacting factors, even quite 'trivial' seeming events can act as a trigger to set the spiral in motion

2. What have I learnt?

What is the most important thing you have learnt from this worksheet? What has surprised you in considering the factors which may be contributing to your depression? Are your ready to evaluate your choice of strategies for tackling your depression and moving forward?

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