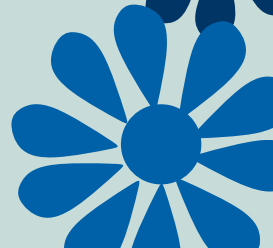


A large, light blue, stylized flower graphic with multiple petals, positioned in the upper left corner of the page.

# Prisoner Depression and Low Mood

A self help guide



*Supporting you to live well*



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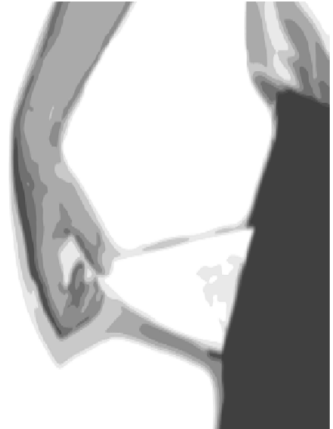
## **These are the thoughts of two people who are depressed:**

“I feel so alone, I will never see my friends again, I guess they have dropped me. They probably don’t like me – who would? There is no point in making any effort. It doesn’t pay off... I just hate myself”.

“I feel like crying all the time, but I feel I must hide it from others. I am so tired and can’t get interested in anything, or keep my mind on things I should be doing. I can’t even do basic things that seem so easy to other people...”

You may have had similar thoughts yourself. Depression is a very common problem and many people feel low or down in the dumps at times. This is often due to life stresses such as bereavement, money or housing problems or difficulties in relationships.

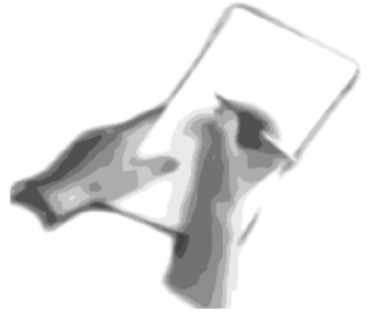
Being sentenced and sent to prison is also stressful so not surprisingly depression is often a problem for people in prison.



## How can this guide help me?

It may seem that nothing can be done to help you feel better if you are in prison. You may not know who to turn to. But there are things that you can do that may help. There is also further help you can get if the depression does not seem to be getting better. It is important to keep hopeful. Most people who have depression do get better.

This guide aims to help you cope with depression and begin to get better. It is written by psychologists and people who have experienced prison. It aims to help you understand depression and to offer some practical suggestions to help you cope.



We suggest you write things down in the booklet to help you begin to understand and begin to deal with depression practically. Sometimes stopping and thinking can make things clearer, as can writing things down. If writing is difficult, talking to someone you trust can help too.

## What we know about depression

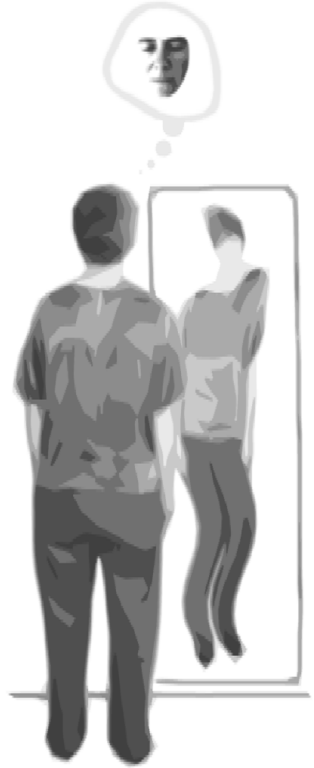
Life is sometimes difficult and, as mentioned factors such as low income, divorce, relationship problems, loss of work and other hard things to deal with can make people more likely to become depressed. We now know that the way we think can also play an important role in depression.

The way a person thinks when they are depressed is very different from how they think when not depressed. Perhaps you can identify some examples of depressed thinking in yourself or in someone you know who has depression. For example, someone may think they are useless or that things will never get better.

When thoughts begin to change like this, other changes also happen. Changes in thoughts, feelings, behaviours and in your body are all part of depression.

## These are some of the signs or symptoms that you may experience if you are depressed:

- **Emotions or feeling – (tick if you feel like this)**
  - Feeling sad, guilty, upset, numb or despairing
  - Losing interest or enjoyment in things
  - Crying a lot or unable to cry when a truly sad event occurs
  - Feeling alone even if you are in company
  - Feeling angry and irritable about the slightest of things



- **Physical or bodily signs**
  - Tiredness
  - Restless
  - Sleep problems
  - Feeling worse at a particular time of day - usually mornings
  - Changes in weight, appetite and eating
  
- **Thoughts**
  - Losing confidence in yourself
  - Expecting the worst and having negative or gloomy thoughts
  - Thinking that everything seems hopeless
  - Thinking you hate yourself
  - Poor memory or concentration
  
- **Behaviour**
  - Having difficulty in making decisions
  - Can't be bothered to do everyday tasks
  - Putting things off
  - Taking it out on others

If you have ticked many of these boxes then you may be experiencing low mood or depression. When you're depressed you may believe that you're helpless and alone in the world; you often blame yourself for all the faults that you think you have. At the bottom of all this you feel bad about yourself, about the world and about the future. So you tend to lose interest in what's going on around you and you don't get any satisfaction out of the things you used to enjoy. It can become hard to make decisions or to carry out little tasks that you once did with no problem at all.

### **In summary**

Stressful situations can lead to depression. When someone is depressed there are usually changes in the way they think, feel, behave and in their body's reactions. Gloomy thoughts play an important part in depression.

## How can I understand these feelings?

The way you think about things affects the way you feel, which affects the way you behave. It is difficult to change the way you feel, but you can change the way you think.

When you are feeling depressed you might have gloomy thoughts a lot of the time. With each negative thought the feelings of depression are likely to increase.



Sometimes negative thoughts can stop you from doing the things that you would normally do (for example “I can’t be bothered, there is no point”). As a result, you may have critical thoughts which make you feel even worse. In other words, you get caught up in a negative circle.

### For example:

Suppose you are walking into the exercise yard and you see a friend who appears to ignore you completely. You might wonder why he has turned against you and this makes you feel upset. Later on, you mention the incident to your friend, who tells you that he was worried about a problem of his own at the time and didn’t even notice you. This explanation should normally make you feel better and put what happened out of your mind. But if you’re depressed, you probably believe he really has rejected you. You might not even talk to your friend and then the mistake makes it worse. If you’re feeling depressed you’re more likely to make mistakes like this over and over again. It can be like a roundabout you can’t get off, a negative circle. It can look a bit like this:





Each part seems to make other parts worse.

Has a similar cycle happened to you? Try and draw it out.

## Can I recognise these gloomy thoughts?

When you are feeling low the gloomy thoughts may be so familiar and happen so often to you that you just accept them as fact.

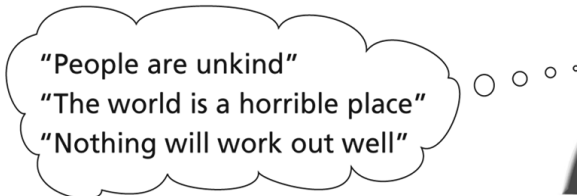
Gloomy thoughts are often about yourself for example:



**Do you have any gloomy thoughts about yourself? – jot them down:**

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These thoughts are sometimes about other things such as the world around you or the future. For example:



**Do you have any gloomy thoughts about other things? – jot them down:**

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### **What more should I know about these gloomy negative thoughts?**

We have given examples of the negative thoughts people have when they are depressed. It is important to remember that you might still occasionally have some of these sorts of thoughts when you are not depressed. The difference is that you would generally ignore them. When you are depressed, however, these thoughts are around all the time and are hard to ignore.

Let's look at these **negative thoughts** in more detail:

1. Negative thoughts tend to **just pop into your mind**. They are not actually arrived at on the basis of reason and logic, they just seem to happen.
2. Often the thoughts are **unreasonable and unrealistic**. They serve no purpose. All they do is make you feel bad and they get in the way of what you really want out of life. If you think about them carefully, you will probably find that you have jumped to a conclusion which is not necessarily correct. For

example, thinking someone doesn't like you because they don't smile at you or acknowledge you.

3. Even though these thoughts are unreasonable they probably seem reasonable and correct to you **at the time**.
4. The more you believe and accept negative thoughts, the worse you are likely to feel. If you allow yourself to get into the grip of these thoughts, you find you are viewing everything in a negative way.

**As we have said, when people become depressed, their thinking often changes. You make some of the following thinking errors when you are depressed:**

### **1. Exaggerating the negative**

This means you think things are much worse than they really are.

For example, you make a small mistake at work and fear that you may be disciplined because of it. In other words, you jump to a gloomy conclusion and believe that it is likely to happen or you may spend a long time worrying that you have upset a friend only to find later he or she couldn't even remember the comment.

#### **Do you ever exaggerate the negative?**

Think back over the last 2 weeks and please list:

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## 2. Over-generalising

For example, if one person doesn't get on with you, you may think, "no one likes me". If one of your many daily tasks hasn't been finished, you think, "I've achieved nothing – nothing has been done".

In other words from one thing that has happened to you, you wrongly jump to a conclusion which is much bigger and covers all sorts of things.

**Do you ever over-generalise?** Think back over the last 2 weeks and please list:

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### 3. Ignoring the positive

People who are depressed tend to focus their thinking on negative or bad events and ignore positive or good events. You might have played a game of pool and missed one easy shot, but played well in general. After the game, you just think about that one missed shot and not the others that you played well. You may have many good friends who you have known for years, but you concentrate and worry about one that has fallen out with you rather than remembering all the other good friendships.



**Do you sometimes ignore the positive?** Think back over the last 2 weeks and please list:

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#### **4. Taking things personally and being self critical**

Often if our mood is low we blame ourselves for anything which goes wrong, even if things have nothing to do with us in reality.

For example, a prison officer appears to be off-hand with you - your automatic thought is “he’s got it in for me... what have I done?” But it is more likely that he’s tired or has had a bad day himself. In this example, you have taken the blame personally. You may also be self critical and put yourself down with thoughts such as “I am an idiot”, “I never get things right”.

**Do you sometimes take things personally when they probably have little to do with you? Think back over the last 2 weeks and please list:**

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## 5. Mindreading

Sometimes we think we know what others are thinking and if our mood is low we expect it to be bad. For example if your cell mate is quiet you may think “that’s because he thinks I am boring”.

**Do you mindread?** Jot down some examples from the last two weeks:

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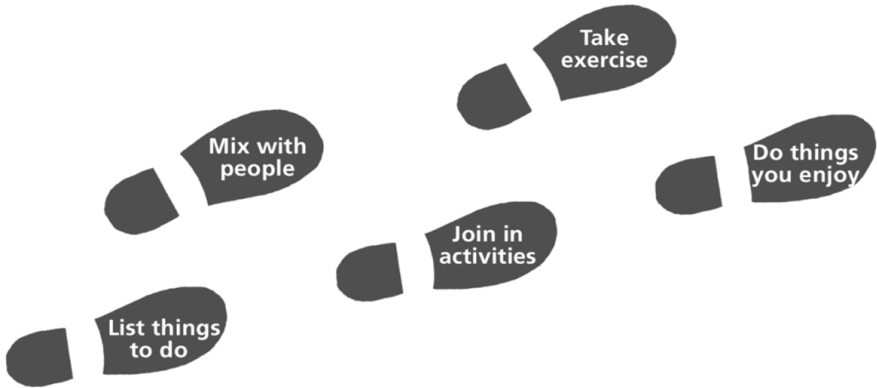
### In Summary

When people are depressed, they often have gloomy or unhelpful thoughts about themselves, the world and the future. They can also make errors in the way they think. They exaggerate the negative, over-generalise bad events, ignore positives in their lives and can take things personally. It is important to uncover gloomy thoughts and errors in thinking.



## How can I help myself?

So far we have talked about how what we think affects the way we feel. We have looked at some ways of thinking which can make depression worse. In this section, we look at practical steps to help to overcome depressive feelings, thoughts and behaviours. Even though at first these steps appear difficult, it is worth making the effort in order to get through what feels like a very difficult time.



## 1. Making a daily plan

When people are depressed they often don't feel like doing anything, find it hard to decide what to do each day and can end up doing very little. When you are in prison, it can seem at first that it is difficult to plan your own time. But many people in prison still manage to make a daily plan to give structure to their lives. Making your own structure within the prison regime is important.

Begin by making a list of things to do. The things to do can be as simple as spending a little time doing exercises, such as sit-ups or press-ups. Then plan out an action list, start off with the easiest task at first and don't aim too high. It might be useful to take a sheet of paper and write the days of the week and the times, as shown. Exercise has been shown to make people in prison feel less depressed.

You can then write down what you plan, and tick off what you've done. At the end of each day you'll be able to look back and see what you've achieved. Physical exercise and activity can really help to lift your mood. Try and build a little in each day. Mixing with others can also help, especially if they have a positive outlook.

Here is a list of activities tried by other prisoners:

- reading
- exercise in cell or gym if available
- learning yoga
- taking part in educational activities
- creative writing etc.

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
9am							
11am							
1pm							
3pm							
5pm							
7pm							

## 2. Achievements and pleasure

When people are depressed they often forget what they've achieved and what they enjoy. Most people have more things going for them than they are usually aware of. When you have started to keep an action plan, look back over what you have done and put a P next to those which have given you pleasure and an A next to those activities where you felt you achieved something and did well.

Try not to be too modest: people who are depressed tend not to take credit for their achievements. Try and build some pleasant events into your day. Each day



treat yourself, perhaps to something extra from the prison shop, a period of listening to music or to enjoying a television or radio programme.

If you make the effort to achieve something it will feel good if you reward yourself afterwards.

### 3. The ABC of changing feelings

Most people who are depressed think their lives are so awful that they have every right to feel sad. In fact, our feelings come from what we think about and how we make sense of what has happened to us.

Try to think about a recent event which had upset and depressed you. You should be able to sort out three parts of it:

- A. The event
- B. Your thoughts about it
- C. Your feelings about it

Most people are normally only aware of A and C. Let's look at an example.

Suppose someone criticises you for something you have done.

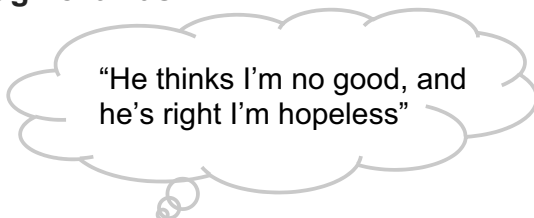
A. The event – criticism



C. Your feelings – hurt, embarrassed.

But what was **B!**... your thoughts? What were you thinking?

Let's imagine it was:

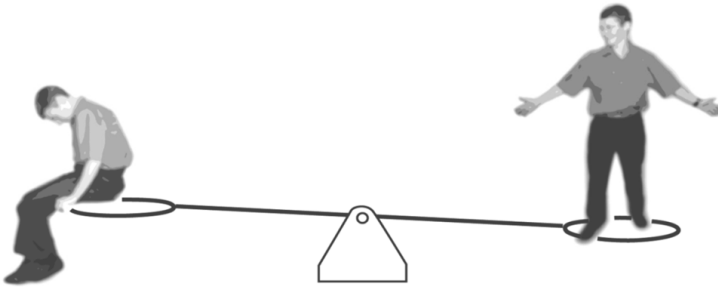


How depressing! No wonder you feel bad! It isn't always obvious what the thoughts are but it is important to become aware of these three stages A, B and C as if we can change what we think about an event we may be able to change how we feel about it.

#### 4. Balancing

A useful technique to try is called balancing. When you have a negative, critical thought, balance it out by making a more positive statement to yourself. For example:

The thought: "I'm no good at anything", could be balanced with: "my friend said how much she missed me when she visited yesterday".



#### 5. The double column technique

Another thing you could do is write down your negative automatic thoughts in one column – and, opposite each one, write down a more balanced positive thought. Like this:

<b>Negative automatic thought</b>	<b>Balancing thoughts</b>
John doesn't like me; he ignored me today.	He may be just having a bad day himself. Maybe he's had bad news.

## 6. Try and remember details

The person who is depressed doesn't remember details of events but tends to think in general statements, such as "I've never been any good at anything". Try and train yourself to remember details so that good times and experiences are easy to recall. Think of particular examples, rather than in general.



A daily diary can help you to do this. Make lists of actual achievements and good aspects of yourself such as "I'm always on time", "I helped my friend on Tuesday", "I'm a good listener", "I really care for my family".

Try to keep a diary of events, feelings and thought. It may look a bit like the following table. Use the approaches described to gain more balanced thoughts. Look out for errors in thinking.

<b>Event</b>	<b>Feeling or emotion</b>	<b>Thoughts in your mind</b>	<b>Other more balanced thoughts</b>
<b>Example</b>			
People were laughing when I entered the room	Low, depressed, angry	They think I'm stupid	I'm taking this too personally, this may be nothing to do with me. There may have been some joke they were sharing.

<b>Your example</b>			

**In Summary**

Using a daily plan, pleasure and achievement notes and keeping a diary of automatic thoughts and more balanced thoughts can help you to fight depression and the gloomy thoughts that go with it.

**7. Solving difficult problems**

Sometimes we feel overwhelmed by the very complicated and difficult things we have to do. One thing which helps with this sort of problem is to write down each of the steps which you have to take in order to complete the job – then tackle one step at a time.

Problem solving can seem more difficult when you feel depressed. If you have a particular difficult problem, try and look back to times when you may have successfully solved similar problems and use the same approach. Or ask a friend (or Listener) what they would do in a similar situation. Be clear. Write down all your possible options. Use brainstorming – where even apparently silly solutions are written down to be considered. Choose the best approach.

**Try this way of problem solving yourself. What is the problem?** (write below)

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**Try the following:** List all sorts of solutions. Remember how you may have solved similar problems in the past. What would your friends advise? Or what would you advise a friend with a similar problem?

**Steps to tackle it:**

Step 1 .....

Step 2 .....

Step 3 .....

Step 4 .....

Step 5 .....



## **8. Reducing unhelpful activity**

Sometimes when people are depressed they start doing things to try and feel better that are really quite unhelpful. For example: drinking alcohol, staying in bed, binge eating, zoning out in front of the TV. By noting everything you do in your daily plan, you can start to see patterns of what helps and what makes you feel worse. So it might be a case of increasing some behaviours and reducing others.

## **9. Long term beliefs**

Sometimes people have long held views about themselves that are very self critical – for example, “I’m not a very clever person” or “I’m not a very lovable person”. These beliefs are often a product of our past experience and may hold no truth in present reality. Try to challenge this criticism, stop knocking yourself down and look for evidence that disproves the beliefs. What would you say to a good friend if they held that belief about themselves?

## **10. Particularly stressful times**

Many people experience a difficult time in their lives that is linked with events that they cannot change. For example, a bereavement or several bereavements over a short period, imprisonment, longstanding illness, chronic financial problems or isolation. Sometimes several of these events happen together and depression can result. In time, most people bounce back, but it may be hard to do this without help.

**11. Antidepressants** are sometimes prescribed by the doctor in healthcare or psychiatrist. They have been shown to be helpful for many people suffering from depression.

Antidepressants work on the chemicals in the brain to make you feel less depressed. They are not addictive and once you begin to feel better, usually after quite a few months, you can plan, with your doctor, to stop taking them. This should not cause you any difficulty and your doctor will gradually reduce the dose.

When you begin a course of antidepressants it is important to remember that they do not work immediately. It will take 2-4 weeks before they take effect and you need to keep taking them regularly to feel the benefit. They can have some side effects at first but these are usually quite mild and will generally wear off as treatment continues. Your doctor or nurse will advise you about this. Although people often start to feel better within 2-4 weeks of taking antidepressants, it is important to keep taking them for as long as your doctor advises. This helps stop the depression coming back.

## **12. Further help**

We hope you will use the exercises suggested in this booklet. They should help you begin to overcome your depression and get back control over your thoughts and your life.

If you feel that you are making little progress, then other help is available to aid you in overcoming your problem. Discuss this with your case officer or enquire at the Healthcare Centre if it is possible to see a counsellor, a nurse or to have contact with the Samaritans.

### **There are also booklets in this series on:**

- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Anxiety

These publications are available at [www.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp](http://www.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp)

## Useful organisations

- **Apex Charitable Trust**

Tel: 01744 612 898

Unit 1, Ruskin Leisure Ltd, Ruskin Drive, St Helens, Merseyside, WA10 6RP

Aims to improve the employment prospects of ex-offenders and the long-term unemployed by providing services, training and advice. Currently only offer services to women in the Merseyside area – but are able to signpost to other support services.

- **Combat Stress**

Helpline: 0800 138 1619

Combat Stress, Tyrwhitt House, Oaklawn Road, Leatherhead, Surrey KT22 0BX

The UK's leading military charity specialising in the care of Veterans' mental health. We treat conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety disorders. Our services are free of charge to the Veteran.

- **Criminal Cases Review Commission**

Tel: 0121 233 1473

5 St Philip's Place, Birmingham, B3 2PW

An independent body, set up under the Criminal Appeal Act 1995 to investigate the possible miscarriage of justice.

- **MIND**

Tel: 0300 123 3393

15 -19 Broadway, London, E15 4BQ

Working for a better life for people in mental distress, and campaigning for their rights.

Helpline available Mon - Fri, 9am - 6pm.

- **NACRO**

Helpline: 0300 123 1999

1<sup>st</sup> Floor, 46 Loman Street, London, SE1 0EH

Offers resettlement information, housing projects and employment training before and after release.

- **National Association of Citizens' Advice Bureaux**  
Contact your local office who can direct you to local groups who can help. Offers advice, information or advocacy on a wide range of issues.
- **PACT – Prison Advice and Care Trust**  
Helpline: 0808 808 3444 (freephone)  
29 Peckham Road, London, SE5 8UA  
Provides a range of services to both prisoners and their families.
- **Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Groups (POPS)**  
Tel: 0161 702 1000  
1079 Rochdale Road, Blackley, Manchester, M9 8AJ  
Offers advice, information and moral support to anyone who has a loved one in prison.
- **Prison Fellowship (England & Wales)**  
Tel: 020 7799 2500  
PO Box 68226, London, SW1P 9WR  
Offers support to prisoners, families and ex-offenders. Although based on a Christian ethos services are offered regardless of belief.
- **Prison Phoenix Trust**  
Tel: 01865 512 521  
PO Box 328, Oxford, OX2 7HF  
Using meditation and yoga, the trust encourages prisoners to find personal freedom inside UK prisons by giving workshops and through correspondence.
- **Prison Reform Trust**  
Tel: 020 7251 5070  
15 Northburgh Street, London, EC1V 0JR  
Campaigns for better conditions in prison and the greater use of alternatives to custody.

- **Prisoners' Advice Service**  
Helpline: 0845 430 8923  
Tel: 020 7253 3323  
PO Box 46199, London, EC1M 4XA  
Takes up prisoners' complaints about their treatment within the prison system.
- **Samaritans (There should be a freephone available on your wing)**  
Tel: 116 123  
Freepost, RSRB-KKBY-CYJK PO Box 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA  
Providing confidential, emotional support to anyone in need.
- **Sexual Health Line**  
Tel: 0300 123 7123
- **Stonham Housing Association**  
Tel: 0345 1414663  
Provides housing for ex-offenders, suitable for men and women of all ages.

## **References**

A full list of references is available on request by emailing [pic@ntw.nhs.uk](mailto:pic@ntw.nhs.uk)

Written by Dr Lesley Maunder and Lorna Cameron, Consultant Clinical Psychologists, The Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

With thanks to prison listeners in Northumberland.

## Northumberland, Tyne and Wear

NHS Foundation Trust

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Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust has developed this resource with the support of NHS healthcare staff, service users and local voluntary sector groups in Northumberland, Tyne and Wear.



## Your feedback

If you would like to know more about us, need information in a different language or format or have a concern, compliment or complaint, then please contact our PALS Team:

PALS Team  
Devon Partnership NHS Trust  
Wonford House, Dryden Road  
Exeter EX2 5AF

Freephone: 0800 0730741  
Email: [dpn-tr.pals@nhs.net](mailto:dpn-tr.pals@nhs.net)

You will also find useful information about our services and issues related to mental health and wellbeing on our website.

[www.dpt.nhs.uk](http://www.dpt.nhs.uk)

