

HANDOUT 6.1

Preliminary Handout for Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy

Please read this before we meet.

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.

Although antidepressants generally work well in reducing depression, they are not a permanent cure—their effects continue only so long as you keep taking the pills. Your doctor could continue to prescribe antidepressants for months, or even years, since this is now recommended if further depression is to be prevented by this means.

However, many people prefer to use other ways to prevent further depression. This is the purpose of the classes you will be attending.

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 a likelihood that you will become

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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 have had depression and 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 and treated with antidepressants. You will meet in eight 2-hour sessions to learn new ways of dealing with what goes on in your mind, and to share and review your experiences with other class members.

After the eight weekly sessions are over, the class will meet again four times over the following few months for reunions, and to see how things are progressing.

HOME PRACTICE: THE IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICING BETWEEN CLASSES

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

This approach depends entirely on your willingness to do home practice between class meetings. This home practice will take at least an hour a day, 6 days a week, for 8 weeks, and involves tasks such as listening to the recorded meditations and other exercises, performing brief exercises, and so on. We appreciate how 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 home practice 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 home practice assignments can teach you how to be more fully aware and present in each moment of life. On one hand, 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, or 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.

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In the classes, you will learn gentle ways to face difficulties, and be supported by the instructor and the 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 become apparent only 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 even when you felt no immediate benefit.

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

THE INITIAL INDIVIDUAL MEETING

Your initial individual meeting provides an opportunity for you to ask questions about the classes or issues related to the points raised in this handout. You may find it useful, before you come for that interview, to make a note of the points you wish to raise.

Good luck!