



# ISSUES WITH **SELF ESTEEM?**

**IF YOU ARE IN NEED OF  
SOME SUPPORT, THIS  
SELF-HELP BOOK CAN  
HELP YOU COPE BETTER  
WITH LOW SELF-ESTEEM.**

A BETTER YOU, FOR A  
**BRIGHTER  
TOMORROW**



**wellbeing**  
services south glasgow

# SELF-ESTEEM SELF-HELP BOOKLET

This booklet is divided into seven sections. It is aimed at helping you to gain a better understanding of:

- Self-esteem and how it develops
- What can happen when you have low self-esteem
- What keeps low self-esteem going
- Effective ways to improve your self-esteem

Whether you are someone who generally has healthy self-esteem but experiences occasional moments of self-doubt in certain situations, or someone who is beset by self-critical thoughts and finds it difficult to think of anything good about yourself - or somewhere in between - this self-help booklet could be helpful to you.

The booklet aims to help you to deal with self-esteem problems using techniques from a well-established psychological treatment known as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

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There are various exercises throughout the booklet to help you understand your own self-esteem and to help you learn ways to improve it. Like any new skill, it may take a bit of time and practice before you notice any changes in the way you feel.

The exercises in this booklet are identified by 'Stop & Think'. To gain the most from these, it is important that you take some time to think about the questions asked, and to complete the exercises.

It may be that it will take several readings of it before you start to write things down. That's okay, just take your time. It is helpful to read each section thoroughly before moving on to the next.

Try to praise yourself for every step you take.



## SECTION 1: WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM?

Self-esteem can generally be defined as the opinion we have of ourselves, our evaluation of our worth and the value we consider ourselves to have as people.

This includes the thoughts we have about ourselves and our abilities, the kind of person we think we are and our expectations. We all have an opinion of ourselves, therefore we all have self-esteem. The value we consider ourselves to have will vary from person to person. Our life experiences play a significant role in determining whether we have healthy self-esteem or low self-esteem. If your life experiences have generally been positive, then it is likely that the beliefs you have about yourself will also be positive and that you will have healthy self-esteem.

On the other hand, if your life experiences have generally been negative, then it is likely that the beliefs you have about yourself will also be negative. It is these negative beliefs about yourself which form low self-esteem. Most people have had a mixture of both positive and negative life experiences and tend to have a range of different beliefs about themselves which they can apply flexibly depending on the situation in which they find themselves. Self-esteem can affect all aspects of our lives on a day-to-day basis, including how we think, feel and behave.

Self-esteem is important as it is considered to be a significant measure of our psychological wellbeing.



### STOP & THINK

Take a few moments to write a short description of yourself. Consider how you think and feel about yourself. You might want to start with 'I am...'

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Now reflect on what you have written about yourself. What words did you use to describe yourself? Would you say that your description of yourself is positive, negative, or balanced? What value did you place on yourself? Would you say that it is positive, negative, or balanced?

### WHAT IS LOW SELF-ESTEEM?

When people have low self-esteem, they tend to have deep rooted negative beliefs about themselves and the type of person they are. These beliefs are often accepted as absolute facts about their identity. They tend to place little value, if any, on themselves as a person of worth. They are likely to be overly critical of themselves, their actions, and their abilities. People with low self-esteem tend to put themselves down, consider themselves to be inferior to others, doubt themselves, and blame themselves when things go wrong. People with low self-esteem may label themselves as 'stupid', 'worthless', 'useless', 'unattractive', 'unlovable' or 'a failure' to name a few.



Below, four people reflect on how they feel about themselves. Although they focus on different aspects of themselves, they all have one thing in common; they all have low self-esteem.

**Rachel, 45:** *"I find that I am always asking my husband and daughter if I look okay. I ask constantly before I leave the house and even when we are out. Sometimes I change my clothes numerous times before leaving the house, despite my family assuring me that I looked good in my original outfit. I just never think that I look good enough and worry what others will think of my appearance."*

**Tom, 38:** *"I feel as though I don't have a voice. I find that I go along with other people's point of view even if I disagree with them. I wish I could express my own views but I just can't. I tell myself that I'm a loser, my views aren't important and that no-one is interested in what I have to say. I can't stand up for myself at all and if I did, I think that people would probably dislike me."*

**Linda, 57:** *"I can't take compliments at all. If someone says something nice to me or praises me I think that they are lying to make me feel better. I can't give myself credit for anything I have done well and constantly undermine my achievements. I tend to focus on how I could have or should have done better. I tear strips off myself. I tell myself I'm not good enough. Come to think of it, I wouldn't talk to my worst enemy the way I talk to myself!"*

**Sam, 25:** *"I feel so self-conscious when I am out. I am convinced that people are looking at me and making judgments about me. I always think that people are thinking I'm ugly or weird. I hate walking into a room full of people. I become really aware of myself and begin to tense up. Sometimes I even begin to sweat and can feel myself blushing. This really embarrasses me as I'm sure that people notice. I'm often convinced they have been talking about me."*

## HOW DOES SELF-ESTEEM DEVELOP?

Early life experiences play a significant role in the development of self-esteem. The experiences that you had and how you were treated in your childhood and adolescent years, will affect how you think of yourself as an adult. The boxes below summarise some of the early life experiences which are associated with healthy self-esteem and low self-esteem.

## HEALTHY SELF-ESTEEM

- Listened to
- Praised
- Given attention
- Treated with respect
- Getting along with others
- Success at school or sports
- Given opportunities
- Having mistakes & failures recognised & accepted
- Feeling loved
- Unconditional love

## LOW SELF-ESTEEM

- Ignored
- Constantly criticised
- Lack of Praise or affection
- Neglected
- Abused
- Different to others
- Not doing well at school or in sports
- Living in a bad area
- Made to feel that not being perfect was a weakness
- Made to feel unworthy of being loved
- Conditional love – 'I will love you if...'

Although the beliefs we have about ourselves are, to a large extent, learned and formed in childhood and adolescence, what happens to us in our adult life can also affect our self-esteem. Some examples of things which may affect our self-esteem in adulthood include financial troubles, our appearance, excessive or harsh criticism, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, chronic pain and illness, relationship difficulties, or traumatic events.

Low self-esteem can also be a consequence of other problems, for example, depression, long standing anxiety, or severe stress. If you think that the negative beliefs you have about yourself are a symptom of another problem, then tackling the root problem may be the most effective way to proceed. It is likely that when the root problem has been treated successfully, low self-esteem will no longer be an issue. If you feel that you would like help with another problem, then Wellbeing Services may be able to help.

For more information you can visit our website at [www.wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk](http://www.wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk) or call us on 0141 232 2555.





### STOP & THINK

Consider the roots of your self-esteem. Write down some of the experiences in your life, perhaps as a child or in adolescence, or even in adulthood which may have contributed to the negative beliefs and opinions you have about yourself.

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Try to accept that the negative beliefs and opinions you have about yourself are an understandable reaction to your life experiences - but remember that they are not necessarily true or factual.

### WHEN IS LOW SELF-ESTEEM A PROBLEM?

We can all be dissatisfied and unhappy with ourselves at some point or another. Sometimes life events such as job loss, relationship breakdowns, or illness can dent our self-esteem. For the majority of people, however, these dents to self-esteem are temporary. If you find that you constantly think about yourself in negative terms and find it hard to think of anything good about yourself, then you may have a problem with low self-esteem.



### STOP & THINK

The list of statements below are related to your general feelings about yourself. Take some time to consider each statement and indicate how strongly you agree or disagree by ticking the appropriate box. There are no right or wrong answers here – just the truth about how you see yourself.

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	3	2	1	0
2.	At times, I think I am no good at all.	0	1	2	3
3.	I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	3	2	1	0
4.	I am able to do things as well as most other people.	3	2	1	0
5.	I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	0	1	2	3
6.	I certainly feel useless at times.	0	1	2	3
7.	I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.	3	2	1	0
8.	I wish I could have more respect for myself.	0	1	2	3
9.	All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	0	1	2	3
10.	I take a positive attitude toward myself.	3	2	1	0

Rosenberg, M. (1989) *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image*. Revised edition. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

When you have completed this, add up your scores for each answer. The higher the score, the higher the self-esteem. If you scored below 15, then it is possible that you have low self-esteem.



## HOW LOW SELF-ESTEEM AFFECTS US

Low self-esteem can affect how we think, how we feel, both emotionally and physically and how we behave and each of these areas can influence the others.

**It affects how we think** When you have low self-esteem, you often have self-critical thoughts and negative beliefs about yourself and the kind of person you are. You will tend to dismiss positives about yourself and focus on weaknesses and flaws. Typically, someone with low self-esteem might:

- Think that they are not good enough
- Worry about what others think of them
- Blame themselves for things that aren't their fault
- Automatically assume that they can't do things without even trying
- Dwell on criticism and perceived mistakes

### **It affects how we feel emotionally**

If you have a low opinion of yourself and you are constantly putting yourself down, you may begin to feel a range of negative emotions including feeling sad and unhappy, depressed, anxious, guilty, ashamed, frustrated, angry and so on.

### **It affects how we feel physically**

If your emotions are negatively affected by low self-esteem, this may have an impact on how you feel physically. You may notice that you experience uncomfortable bodily sensations such as fatigue, lack of energy, headaches, blushing, and tension, to name a few.


### **It affects how we behave**

Low self-esteem can affect your behaviour and how you act in everyday situations. It can have an impact on how you behave at work, in your relationships and in your leisure time. Some of the typical behaviours of people with low self-esteem include:

- Avoidance – not going out or seeing people
- Avoiding activities that involve being judged e.g. competitive sports
- Working too hard, trying to be perfect in everything they do
- Not engaging in enjoyable activities because they don't believe that they deserve to relax or enjoy themselves
- Passing up new challenges or opportunities
- Avoiding speaking out

- Not being assertive and expressing their wants, needs and opinions
- Eagerness to please others and gain others' approval
- Reacting over sensitively
- Constantly seeking reassurance that things are okay
- Being overly apologetic
- Doing things that they don't agree with or that they don't want to do
- Taking responsibility/ blaming themselves for things that have nothing to do with them or are not their fault
- Comfort eating or closely monitoring weight

Body language such as poor posture, lack of eye contact, downturned head and hesitancy may also be a sign that you have low self-esteem.



**STOP & THINK**  
Take some time to consider and write down how low self-esteem affects you on a day-to-day basis. What areas of your life are affected? In what way?

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## WHAT KEEPS LOW SELF-ESTEEM GOING?

Low self-esteem is often kept going by the self-critical thoughts and beliefs we have about ourselves based on past experiences. These can be triggered by criticism or perceived criticism from others. The negative opinion we have about ourselves can affect how we feel and lead to unhelpful behaviours, which reinforce our low self-esteem and make us feel even worse about ourselves creating a 'vicious cycle'.

### Let's look at an example to illustrate.

Imagine you are at work and your boss points out some mistakes that you have made in a report. You may begin to think that you are rubbish at your job and question your ability. You may tell yourself that nothing you do is ever good enough and that unless you work harder you will mess up again, get criticised again or worse lose your job.

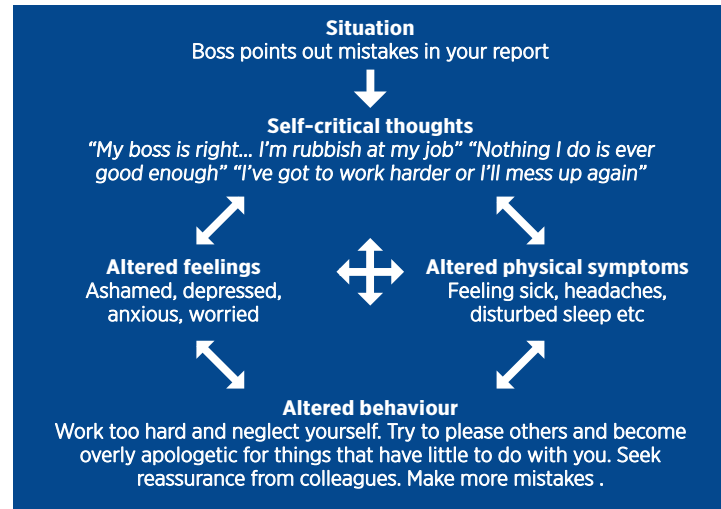
These type of thoughts would naturally cause you to feel bad about yourself perhaps ashamed, depressed, anxious and worried. So what you think has affected how you feel.

You may begin to notice physical changes in your body such as feeling sick, headache, disturbed sleep and lack of concentration. You may then begin to work too hard and neglect yourself, become overly apologetic and desperately try to please others, seek reassurance from your colleagues, or make even more mistakes because you are so tired (behaviour). This behaviour reinforces what we think of ourselves and maintains low self-esteem.

### The following diagram links these areas together.

This diagram shows us that what we think about a situation affects how we feel, physically and emotionally and changes what we do. What we do then confirms what we think about ourselves and so the 'vicious cycle' keeps going.

This self-help booklet aims to help you to weaken the 'vicious cycle' by helping you to deal with the unhelpful thinking habits and self-defeating patterns of behaviour that keep it going.



## SUMMARY

- Self-esteem can generally be defined as the opinion we have of ourselves, our evaluation of our worth and the value we consider ourselves to have as people.
- When people have low self-esteem, they tend to have deep rooted negative beliefs about themselves and the type of person they are.
- Our life experiences, particularly in our childhood and adolescent years, play a significant role in determining whether we have healthy self-esteem or low self-esteem.
- Low self-esteem can affect how we think, feel and behave and each of these areas can influence the others.
- Low self-esteem is often kept going by self-critical thoughts and unhelpful patterns of behaviour, creating a 'vicious cycle'.



## SECTION 2: SELF-ESTEEM AND THINKING

If you have low self-esteem it is likely that you will experience negative self-statements and self-critical thoughts on a daily basis.

These self-statements and thoughts form the overall opinion that you have about yourself. You may think of these thoughts as your 'inner critic' – the voice in your head that never has anything good to say about you. Your thoughts are strongly related to how you feel, therefore if you are constantly experiencing negative thoughts about yourself, it is likely that you will feel bad about yourself and suffer a great deal of emotional distress. These type of thoughts are called negative automatic thoughts.

### FEATURES OF NEGATIVE AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

- They are automatic – they pop into your head, you are often unaware of them and they seem to come from nowhere.
- They may seem reasonable at the time and often you accept them as absolute fact or truth without question.
- They are hard to stop.
- They are the kind of thoughts that, if they were true, would have a negative impact on most people's self-esteem.

### UNHELPFUL THINKING STYLES

Most of the thoughts we have when we experience low self-esteem tend to fall into some common categories which we call unhelpful thinking styles (or cognitive distortions) as outlined below.



#### STOP & THINK

As you read through the unhelpful thinking styles, place a tick next to those you think are most relevant to you.

**Mental Filter:** Focusing on only one part of a situation or one part of yourself and ignoring the rest. This usually involves focusing on the negative part of a situation or yourself and dismissing the positives and/or your successes.

**Example:** *After having delivered a presentation at work you receive a lot of positive feedback. One colleague however makes a slight criticism of one aspect of your presentation. You dismiss the positive feedback from the majority and focus on the negative, until eventually you believe that the presentation was poor and that you are no good at these or public speaking.*

**Mind-Reading:** Assuming that you know what other people are thinking (usually about you), when in fact communicating with a person and asking what they think, is the only way of actually knowing what they think.

**Examples:** *"I've never spoken to her but I just know she doesn't like me."*

*"He's thinking that I don't know the first thing about doing my job correctly."*

*"I better not suggest that idea, he'll think I'm stupid."*

*"She doesn't understand what I mean."*





**□ Magnification and Minimisation:** Magnifying the positive attributes of other people and minimising your own positive attributes. Constantly undermining yourself.

**Example:** *"Getting that promotion doesn't mean I'm any good at my job, it was just luck. Other people are far better at the role than me. They have far better communication skills and they are much better at writing reports."*

**□ 'Shoulds' and 'Musts':** By constantly thinking or saying 'I should' and 'I must', you can put unreasonable demands or pressure on yourself. This can sometimes create unrealistic expectations.

**Examples:** *"Making a mistake would be a disaster. I should never make a mistake".*

*"I must ensure that I please everyone all of the time."*

**□ All or nothing thinking:** Seeing only one extreme or another and no in-between. Believing that something, or someone, can only be good or bad, right or wrong and so on.

**Examples:** *"If it's not perfect, I've failed."*

*"If I don't look my absolute best tonight then there is no point in going out."*

**□ Over generalisation:** Taking one experience in the past or present and imposing it on all current or future situations.

**Examples:** *"I wasn't successful at my first couple of job interviews. I'll never get a job."*

*"I never have luck in relationships. I always mess up."*

**□ Labelling:** Assigning labels to ourselves or other people – often negative labels

**Examples:** *"My son is doing badly at school. I must be a bad mother."*

*"I didn't get that promotion, I'm such a loser."*

*"I'm just a boring person really."*

**□ Personalisation:** Blaming yourself or taking responsibility for everything that goes wrong or could go wrong even when you may only be partly responsible or not responsible at all.

**Examples:** *"If I was a better husband my wife wouldn't have had an affair."*

*"If everyone at my party doesn't have a good time it'll be my fault."*

## IDENTIFYING NEGATIVE AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

When you notice a change in how you feel (e.g. sad, angry, irritable), take time to examine what is going through your mind. Often it is hard to do this as so many thoughts go through your mind all the time and can become muddled up. When you feel bad about yourself, try tuning in to your 'inner critic'. Ask yourself *"What was I thinking about just then?"* *"What was my 'inner critic' saying to me?"*

Noticing the negative thoughts you experience is important if you are to begin tackling them. You can train yourself to notice your thoughts. One way of doing this is to use a thought diary.

## THOUGHT DIARY

Thought diaries can provide a way of recording your thoughts, identifying negative, self-critical thoughts and becoming more aware of them. When learning a new skill, it's useful to go back to basics. Writing it down can help!

The following table gives an example of a thought diary and how to complete it.



### STOP & THINK Thought Diary

**Date/time:**  
When you had the negative/self-critical thought

**Situation:**  
The place where you had the self-critical thought. You may also want to note who was with you, anything that was happening at the time and what was said.

**Mood:**  
How you felt at the time, for example did you feel embarrassed, upset, ashamed, or angry?

**Thought:**  
Write down the self-critical thought. What was going through your mind at that time?

**How much do I believe the self-critical thought?**  
On a scale of 0-10, rate how much you believe the thought (0=not at all, 10=completely believe)



*Here is Rachel's diary:*

DATE/TIME	SITUATION	MOOD	NEGATIVE THOUGHT(S)	BELIEF RATING
20 <sup>th</sup> March, 7pm	Getting ready to go out, trying on different outfits	Upset, irritated, angry	I am fat and ugly, nothing I put on looks good. There is no point going out looking like this, I will only embarrass my friends.	10
21 <sup>st</sup> March, 11am	In meeting at work	Anxious, nervous	I'm not good enough to be in this job. My opinion doesn't matter, I just talk rubbish anyway.	8

For the next week or so, write down any negative/self-critical thoughts you have about yourself as you go about your day. Try to get into the habit of noticing them. Notice if any of them fall into the *unhelpful thinking styles* categories we looked at previously.

This can be quite difficult. Like all skills, you will get better at it with practice. So don't worry about taking a long time over this before moving on to the next section. It may be helpful to ask a friend or family member to help you – they may be able to prompt you to remember the unhelpful, negative thoughts you experienced.

Think of yourself as a detective – trying to string together clues to what triggers and perpetuates your low self-esteem. Carry paper and a pen with you (or use your phone) so you can note things down just after they happen. If you can't do it at the time, try to recall and write down the thoughts as soon as possible after the event.

### CHALLENGING NEGATIVE AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

One of the main problems with negative automatic thoughts is that we often accept them as absolute facts or truths rather than what they actually are – just our view or opinion. It is this unquestioning acceptance of our thoughts which helps our 'inner critic' to thrive and continue to have a negative impact on our self-esteem. The next step after identifying negative automatic thoughts, therefore, is to learn to challenge them and develop a more realistic, balanced point of view.

One of the most straightforward ways to challenge unhelpful thoughts is to weigh up the evidence for and against them and try come to a more balanced way of thinking.

### What is the evidence?

Think of it like a jury in a court case. To know the truth we need to pull together information/hard facts about what actually happened (*not just what we think happened*). For example if a person with low self-esteem thinks "I am fat and ugly, nothing I put on looks good, there is no point going out, I will only embarrass my friends", we can look at the evidence for and against. Is this true, or is it just your opinion?

**Evidence for:** Refers to the information that you feel backs up your thought. What makes you think this? It may be how you feel now, or about previous experiences.

**Evidence against:** Refers to the information that doesn't back up your thought or contradicts your thought. It may be things that your family or friends have said to you, or about past experiences.

**Balanced coping thought:** When you've considered all the evidence, try to come to a more balanced, realistic perspective about the situation. You can then learn to remember this every time your 'inner critic' speaks.

**Re-rate belief:** When you have considered all the evidence and come to a more balanced, realistic perspective about the situation, re-rate how much you believe your original thought. You should find that you do not believe it as much as you did before you looked at all of the evidence and that you feel better about things.

Rachel challenges her self-critical thought from earlier in the diary below.

NEGATIVE THOUGHT(S)	
I am fat and ugly, nothing I put on looks good. There is no point going out looking like this, I will only embarrass my friends.	
EVIDENCE FOR	EVIDENCE AGAINST
The dress I want to wear feels too tight – I've definitely put weight on. My ex-partner said I was ugly. I can't think of any evidence that my friends would be embarrassed by me other than I think it.	I've put on a few pounds – it doesn't mean I'm fat. My ex-partner was a bully, he never said anything nice to anyone. My friends have told me that they like me for the person that I am and not what I look like/wear.
BALANCED, REALISTIC PERSPECTIVE	
Even though I've put on a few pounds and my favourite dress felt a bit tight, it doesn't mean I'm fat. Lots of people have given me compliments and yet I always think about the nasty things that my ex-partner said. His opinion doesn't make it a fact. Friends have told me time and time again that they are interested in me as a person not what I'm wearing.	
BELIEF RATING	3



It can be difficult to think through the evidence *for* and *against* your thoughts. Sometimes it can help to ask a friend or loved one to help you with this task.

There are other questions that you can ask yourself which might help you challenge your self-critical thoughts. These are listed below.



## STOP & THINK

- Is the 'inner critic' at work again?
- Are you comparing yourself to others, focusing on your weaknesses and others people's strengths?
- Are you ignoring your strengths and focusing on your weaknesses?
- Are you taking responsibility or blame for something that wasn't (totally) in your control?
- What might you say to someone else if they said this to you?
- What might a friend or loved one say about the situation or about you?
- What could you say to yourself that is more helpful and less critical?
- Have you made a mistake? If so that's okay, we all make mistakes. What can you learn from the situation?
- Is there anything you can do about your negative thoughts? (E.g. change diet, lifestyle) If yes, what? Make a plan!
- Does this way of thinking help or benefit you in any way? How?
- Does this way of thinking hold you back? How?

## THE GOAL

The goal of this task is to teach you to recognise and tackle negative, self-critical thoughts which make you feel bad about yourself and which negatively impact your self-esteem. Ideally in the end you will have learned this skill and will be able to apply it any time you need it. In the beginning it will be helpful to write the thoughts down in a table as it will help you both identify and tackle them in a structured way.

As time progresses, you may find that you only need to note the unhelpful thought and the balanced coping thought, or eventually you can learn to do this in your head.

This is not likely to happen overnight.

Challenging thoughts is a new skill. Like learning any new skill it will take time. Remember to reward yourself for your efforts with praise and/or treats.

If you wish to find out about identifying and tackling unhelpful thoughts, there are several workbooks that can lead you through examples of people learning to tackle their unhelpful thinking. 'Manage your Mind' is an excellent workbook which is available in all libraries in the South of Glasgow, as well as bookstores.

## SUMMARY

- When you feel bad about yourself, notice what you say to yourself, your 'inner critic'.
- You can learn to challenge unhelpful, self-critical thoughts and replace them with more helpful, realistic thoughts which can help you to improve your self-esteem.
- There are a number of questions you can ask yourself to help you change the way you think about yourself.
- It will take time to learn this new skill.



## SECTION 3: ASSERTIVENESS

Assertiveness is a style of communication in which people clearly state their thoughts, beliefs, needs and opinions to another person, while maintaining respect for that person in the interaction.

Assertiveness enables a person to stand up for themselves, to act in their own best interests and to express their honest feelings comfortably. Assertiveness is strongly related to a sense of self-worth; the belief that you have the same rights, responsibilities and personal value as other people. If you have low self-esteem, you will perhaps place very little value on yourself as a person of worth and find it extremely difficult to be assertive and express your thoughts, feelings, needs and opinions. It may be that you are able to be assertive in some situations (e.g. at home) but not so much in others (e.g. at work).

Although assertiveness may not come easily to you, it is a skill that can be learned. The aim is that you will begin to practise behaving and communicating more assertively and in doing so, reduce behaving and communicating in passive or aggressive ways which often result in distress and feed low self-esteem (see table below).

If you find it hard to ask for what you want, say 'no' without feeling guilty and/or accept and express criticism, then it is possible that you have difficulty asserting yourself.

## COMMUNICATION STYLES

PASSIVE	ASSERTIVE	AGGRESSIVE
Compliant, submissive, puts self down, praises others.	Firm but polite, clear messages, respectful of self and others.	Sarcastic, harsh, always right, superior, disrespectful of others.
Believes that other people's opinions are more important than their own, so it doesn't matter what they think anyway.	Believes or acts as if all the individuals involved are equal, each deserving of respect, and no more entitled than the other to have things done their way.	Believes they are entitled to have things done their way because they are right, and others are less important.
Give in to others, don't get what they want or need, self-critical thoughts, miserable.	Good relationships with others, happy with outcome and to compromise.	Make enemies, upset others and self, feel angry and resentful.



### STOP & THINK

What style of communication do you tend to use?

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## 12 RULES OF ASSERTION

Being assertive is important to our psychological wellbeing. Here are twelve rules of assertion that you can follow to help you become more assertive.

1. Respect yourself, who you are and what you do.
2. Recognise your own needs as an individual separate from what is expected of you in particular roles, such as wife, husband, partner, son, daughter.
3. Make clear statements about how you feel and what you think.
4. Allow yourself to make mistakes. Recognise that it is normal to make mistakes.
5. Change your mind if you choose.
6. Ask for time to think things over.
7. Allow yourself to enjoy your successes, by being pleased with what you have done and by sharing it with others.
8. Ask directly for what you want, rather than hoping someone will notice what you want.
9. Recognise that you're not responsible for the behaviour of other adults.
10. Respect other people and their right to be assertive. Expect the same in return.
11. If you don't understand, say so.
12. Deal with others without being dependent on them for approval.

## PROBLEMS WITH LACK OF ASSERTION

There is no rule saying that you have to be assertive all the time and in some situations it may not be appropriate. For example, if you and a group of friends are deciding where to eat and you genuinely don't mind where you go, you may not express an opinion at all. Generally, however, people who find it difficult to be assertive often feel bad about themselves afterwards for not doing so. They may dwell on a situation, go over it in their head again and again and ask themselves "Why didn't I say that?", "If only I had said that or done this..." This pattern of behaviour can reinforce the negative beliefs that a person has about themselves, negatively affect their confidence, induce feelings of depression, anger and shame and keep low self-esteem going.



## STOP & THINK

Have a look at some of the problems caused by lack of assertion listed below. Place a tick next to those that you recognise as problematic for you.

- Saying 'yes' constantly to favours asked by friends and relatives no matter how unreasonable you think they are. You may even cancel your own plans to accommodate their needs.
- Not returning unwanted or damaged goods to shops. Not voicing concerns about poor service in shops and restaurants.
- Difficulty expressing criticism or a fear of being criticised by others
- Difficulty expressing positive feelings e.g. giving compliments
- A fear of people in authority

In what situations do you find it most difficult to stand up for yourself? (E.g. at work, at home, when out with friends?) Does it occur more often with certain types of people? (E.g. those in authority, young people, relatives, the opposite sex?)

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## COMMON MYTHS ABOUT BEING ASSERTIVE

People often find it difficult to be assertive because they worry about what might happen if they are. These worries tend to be based on false beliefs about assertiveness, some of which are discussed below.

### ***“It’s selfish to say what I want”***

Being assertive does not mean that you are selfish. You are simply putting your own needs on an equal plane with others and respecting yourself as a person with needs, wants, and opinions just like anyone else. It can also be helpful for other people if you are assertive. For example, imagine you are at a concert and the row of people in front of you are standing up blocking your view of the stage. By politely saying something like *“Excuse me could you please sit down, I can’t see the stage”* you would be helping not only yourself but the other people in your row who can’t see the stage.

### ***“If I say what I think I will upset the other person”***

This is unlikely. All you are doing is putting across your point of view as anyone else would. On the contrary, most people will appreciate that you have been honest and upfront with them. You might even find that they agree with you.

### ***“People will dislike me if I become assertive”.***

Think of the people you know who are assertive. Do you like them any less because they are assertive? It is more likely that people will respect you more for standing up for yourself and making your points of view clear. People like to know where they stand.



## STOP & THINK

What do you fear might happen if you were to become more assertive? Do you think these fears are realistic?

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## COMMUNICATING WHAT YOU WANT

Sometimes when we want something we use all sorts of different ways to communicate this such as hints, gestures and hidden meanings in what we say. However, the only way of ensuring that others understand what we want is to communicate this to them in the clearest way possible.

### **Examples:**

- *“I don’t want to go the cinema.”*
- *“I’d like you to give me a hug.”*
- *“I want to leave now.”*

Although it is important to communicate what we want, it is also important to realise that it may not always be possible to get what we want because we have to consider the rights of the other people involved. In this case, it is usually possible to come to a compromise.



## SAYING 'NO'

If we find it difficult to be assertive, it can be hard to say 'no' to people's requests. If we say 'no' we often experience self-critical thoughts which make us feel guilty. To avoid feeling guilty, therefore, we just keep saying 'yes' to every request. The problem with this however is that by agreeing to things that we don't really want to do we are reinforcing to ourselves that our own needs and wants are unimportant which makes us feel bad about ourselves and simply keeps low self-esteem going.

### Let's look at an example.

Every weekend Laura received a call from her younger sister asking her to babysit. Laura loved her niece and wanted to be helpful therefore she always agreed to babysit. She felt guilty about saying 'no' because her sister was still young and loved going out to enjoy herself at the weekend. Meanwhile, Laura was becoming more isolated from her friends as she was spending her time off work babysitting. She began to feel upset, resentful, angry and used.

We can learn ways of saying 'no' that will help us to feel less guilty and more in control. Take a look at some examples below:

- *"I'm sorry, I'm quite busy just now. Maybe another time."*
- *"I'm sorry but I really can't take on anything else at the moment."*
- *"I'd like to help out, but I don't feel up to it at the moment."*
- *"I don't need new windows, I'm happy with what I have. Thank you anyway."*
- *"You're a lovely person but I don't want to go out with you. It was nice of you to ask though."*

If someone has difficulty accepting what you are saying to them then simply repeat yourself over and over again if necessary. It may be that you have to add the word 'no' at the beginning your statement e.g. *"No. I'm sorry I can't make it tonight."*

Laura decided to speak with her sister about babysitting. She decided to say something like *"I really enjoy babysitting at the weekends but I haven't had much time to see my friends recently. At the moment I'm babysitting every weekend. How about if we made it once a fortnight?"* By saying this, Laura acknowledges that she enjoys babysitting but she is also honest about the impact this is having on her own life. She even suggests an alternative arrangement.

**Watch out for self-critical thoughts! Challenge them and remind yourself:**

- That you have explained your reasons why you couldn't do the thing that was requested.
- That it's not your responsibility.
- That it would only upset you if you agreed to it.
- That your decision is for the best. If you feel less used and resentful then maybe you'll be in a better position to help out next time.

## ACCEPTING AND EXPRESSING CRITICISM

An important feature of being assertive is to be able to accept and express criticism.

### PART 1: ACCEPTING CRITICISM

When someone has been critical of something we've done, we tend to take it as a personal attack on ourselves rather than criticism related to our actions. This may be because we've experienced criticism in the past which resulted in distressing feelings. It is important to remember that most of the time when people offer criticism they are intending it to be helpful.



### STOP & THINK

Take a moment to consider the last time you received criticism. Note down the situation and how you reacted.

Situation

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My Reaction

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Look back at the table of thinking styles. Do you think your reaction was  passive,  assertive or  aggressive?



### **Let's look at an example:**

You are at work and your boss comments on a report that you've been working on, he says *"It was good but it would have been better if you had..."*

**Passive response:** *"You're right, it's rubbish. I'm useless at writing reports."*

**Aggressive response:** *"What?! How dare you! You can talk... your report last year was awful!"*

If you were able to respond to the criticism in an assertive manner then it may be more helpful. Firstly consider whether you *agree*, *disagree*, or *partly agree* with the criticism.

If you *agree*, an **assertive response** might be *"Yes I agree with you. I think it would have improved the report to include those things. Perhaps we could arrange to meet up and discuss these things further?"*

If you *disagree*, an **assertive response** might be *"I disagree. I don't think that those things are necessary to the report. Could you explain what you mean a bit further...?"*

If you *partly agree*, an **assertive response** might be, *"I accept that those things could improve the report however I didn't include them because...Perhaps we could arrange to meet up to discuss this further."*

Try to view criticism as a way of learning about yourself. Try not to become overly defensive or immediately agree when someone offers criticism. Simply listen to what they have to say and try to find out something useful from it. Consider whether you agree, disagree, or partly agree with what they are saying and put your response across assertively, according to how you view the situation.

## **PART 2: EXPRESSING CRITICISM**

If you are unhappy with someone's actions or behaviour, it is helpful to try and put across how you feel rather than 'attacking' the other person. Using the word 'I' may therefore be helpful. For example, if your partner is always late when meeting you, you might say *"I get very upset when you are late to meet me. I always make an effort to ensure that I am on time and it makes me feel like I am not important to you."* This communicates to the person how their actions makes you feel and facilitates a discussion. If, on the other hand, you were to say *"You're always late to meet me! You're selfish and inconsiderate"* then it is less constructive and is likely to cause an argument.

### **Some tips for expressing criticism:**

- Try to focus on the behaviour that is making you unhappy rather than 'attack' the person.
- Be honest about how the behaviour makes you feel, using 'I' to describe how the behaviour makes you feel rather than 'you'.
- Try to deal only with facts about the situation rather than making assumptions.
- Start off by acknowledging the positive aspects of the situation.
- Recommend ways in which the situation could be improved.





### STOP & THINK

Think about a situation in which you would like to become more assertive (it may be helpful to look at what you wrote down at the start of this section).

- Plan out what you want to say and do and the best way of saying or doing it using some of the techniques described earlier.
- Try to rehearse what you are going to say or do before going into the situation perhaps with your partner or a friend and ask them to play the other person. If you don't want to do this you can practise by yourself.
- Keep what you want to say clear and to the point.
- Keep good eye contact with the person and keep a calm tone of voice.
- Be polite but firm.
- Try to relax rather than becoming angry.
- Try and keep to what you have planned to say even if the conversation doesn't go as you expected.
- Afterwards, review how it went. What went well? What could be improved?

You may feel nervous before going into the situation but this is quite natural. You are practising a new skill after all. Give credit to yourself for making efforts to become more assertive and try to learn as much as possible from the experience. And remember - you have the right to stand up for yourself!

### SUMMARY

- Assertiveness is a style of communication in which people clearly state their thoughts, beliefs, needs and opinions to another person.
- Assertiveness enables a person to stand up for themselves, to act in their own best interests and to express their honest feelings comfortably.
- Being assertive is important to our psychological wellbeing.
- People who find it difficult to be assertive often feel bad about themselves afterwards for not doing so. This pattern of behaviour can reinforce the negative beliefs that a person has about themselves, negatively affect their confidence, induce feelings of depression, anger, and shame and perpetuate low self-esteem.
- Although assertiveness may not come easily, it is a skill that can be learned.



## SECTION 4: SELF-ESTEEM AND BEHAVIOUR

Self-esteem not only affects our thoughts, it can influence our behaviour too. When our self-esteem is low, the negative thoughts that we have about ourselves can lead us to engage in behaviour that makes us feel even worse about ourselves and keeps low self-esteem going.

When we have low self-esteem we may find that we avoid certain situations and activities because we lack belief in our abilities, have a fear of being criticised and are overly concerned with the possibility of failing. We may also avoid certain social situations because we believe that we are inferior to other people and may be concerned by making a fool of ourselves.

Low self-esteem may lead us to neglect ourselves and withdraw from enjoyable activities because we do not believe that we deserve to relax or enjoy ourselves. Contrary to this, we may do too much for others because we are eager to please other people and gain their approval. These behaviours simply reinforce the negative beliefs we have about ourselves. An important part of improving our self-esteem, therefore, is to start addressing what we do and how we treat ourselves.

### AVOIDANCE

Avoidance is a way of reducing our fears and anxieties by not facing up to, or escaping from, the situations we fear. When we have low self-esteem we may avoid situations because we lack belief in ourselves and fear failure and criticism. Although avoidance can seem to be a way of dealing with the negative beliefs we have about ourselves, it simply keeps them going and reinforces that we can't cope. Over a period of time we may begin to avoid more and more situations which can affect different areas of our lives and this can lessen our quality of life. Our confidence slowly gets worn away and after a while we end up with low expectations about our general ability to cope with life.



### STOP & THINK

Can you think of a situation that you often avoid because of low self-esteem? What do you fear would happen if you were in this situation? What are the chances of your fear actually happening? How could you cope if it did?

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The best way to deal with avoidance is to build up your confidence bit by bit, by gradually facing the situations that you find difficult. The first time you try spending time in a situation that you would normally avoid, you will probably feel anxious and uncomfortable for a while. The next time however it won't be as bad.







## STOP & THINK

Think of a situation that you often avoid. You may wish to refer to the list you made earlier. Pick one of these situations e.g. 'socialising with a large group of people'. Think about how you could achieve this goal by breaking it down into small steps so that it does not feel overwhelming. Try tackling the steps on your list one at a time starting with the easiest. Practise spending time in each of the situations until you feel confident enough to move on to the next step.

### Here is an example:

Rachel often avoids social situations involving large groups of people whether it is friends or people whom she does not know very well. She believes that she has nothing interesting to say and that people wouldn't want to spend time with her. As a result she never goes to parties or work nights out. She often feels left out when people talk about social outings. This makes her feel worse about herself and confirms her belief that she has nothing interesting to say. Rachel makes a plan to tackle her avoidance. She thinks of the steps that could help her to achieve her overall goal of going to a party and writes them down in a hierarchy starting with the easiest.

### HIERARCHY

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|--|
| <b>Goal:</b> Go to a party with friends and people whom I do not know  |
| <b>Step 7:</b> Go on a night out with friends  |
| <b>Step 6:</b> Go to the pub for a short time with a larger group of friends and initiate conversation with a stranger |
| <b>Step 5:</b> Tell a story about myself in the canteen when there is a small group of people in there                 |
| <b>Step 4:</b> Sit in the canteen at work when there a small group of people in there                                  |
| <b>Step 3:</b> Go out to shops at lunchtime with a group of people from work   |
| <b>Step 2:</b> Spend time with small groups of friends in busy places  |
| <b>Step 1:</b> Spend more time with small groups of friends  |

Positive self talk may help you to achieve your goal. These are statements that you can say to yourself when the 'inner critic' starts to appear. Statements such as 'I've done this before, I can do it again', 'nothing bad will happen', 'I can do this' may help you through each step.

It is important to review how you get on at each step. It may be helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- What did you notice when you were carrying out the task you set yourself? How did you feel? What were you thinking?
- What did you do that helped it go well?
- How did you feel after you carried out your plan?
- Was there anything you would do differently next time?

### REDUCED ACTIVITY

When we have low self-esteem we may find that we do a lot for other people in an attempt to please them and gain their approval. We may not, however, be so good at doing positive things for ourselves. We may think that we don't deserve to engage in enjoyable activities or relax, believing that we are not worth it. However, engaging in enjoyable activities and experiencing a sense of accomplishment are important in making us feel good about ourselves and improving our self-esteem. Although it is nice to help other people, we also have to make time for ourselves and treat ourselves better.





## STOP & THINK

The first step to changing the way you treat yourself, is to firstly observe your current activity using a weekly activity schedule like the one below.

Record what you do each day over the next week. For each activity that you do over the week, rate the sense of enjoyment and achievement (0-10) that you get from each activity. Remember that a sense of achievement does not only come from doing huge things (e.g. promotion, graduating), it can also come from day-to-day things (e.g. cooking a nice meal, doing housework when feeling unmotivated). By doing this, you will be able to see how much fun or sense of achievement you are having in an average week.

DAY	MORNING	AFTERNOON	EVENING
MONDAY			
TUESDAY			
WEDNESDAY			
THURSDAY			
FRIDAY			
SATURDAY			
SUNDAY			

Once you have completed your weekly activity schedule, reflect on what you have recorded. If there is not much that is pleasant, fun, or enjoyable to you then this may be a sign that you have to increase your fun activities. You will also be able to start recognising your accomplishments and achievements which you may have dismissed or ignored previously.

### *Think about what you would like to change.*

- Do you need more fun activities in your week?
- What activities would be enjoyable, pleasant, or relaxing?
- What would be something you can do just for you, to treat yourself kindly?
- Are you avoiding or neglecting things in your life, so that there is little sense of achievement in your week?

Thinking of fun and relaxing things for yourself to do may be difficult at first. Remember it does not have to be something big. Perhaps you could go to the cinema, meet a friend for coffee, or spend some time in the garden. Try out new things or take up old hobbies. Why not volunteer for something?

Whatever you are doing set aside time and stick to it! Do something you enjoy on a regular basis. Try not to do too much too soon. Be realistic. Plan to do things which are achievable at your current level of functioning. Although it will be difficult initially, you will feel better about doing things for yourself and taking on new challenges.

### SUMMARY

- When our self-esteem is low, the negative thoughts that we have about ourselves can lead us to engage in behaviour that makes us feel even worse about ourselves and keeps low self-esteem going.
- We may avoid certain situations and activities because we lack belief in our abilities, have a fear of being criticised and are overly concerned with the possibility of failing.
- We may neglect ourselves and withdraw from enjoyable activities because we do not believe that we deserve to relax or enjoy ourselves.
- Overcoming avoidance and engaging in enjoyable activities is important to increasing our confidence and helping us to feel better about ourselves.



## SECTION 5: NOTICING POSITIVE QUALITIES

It can be all too easy to forget about, or dismiss, the positive aspects of ourselves and our lives when our self-esteem is low. If we want to boost our self-esteem however, it is important to start noticing and acknowledging our positive qualities, positive outcomes and positive comments from others.



### STOP & THINK

Write down a list of things you like about yourself. If you find it difficult to think of things try asking yourself some of the questions below. Stick at it. It will get easier once you get going.

- What have you done in your life that you were happy with?
- What have you done well?
- What are some of your achievements?
- What are some skills and talents I have?
- What bad qualities do I not have?
- Have you had to deal with difficult things in your life? Think about how you dealt with those. What does it say about you?
- What have friends and loved ones said they like about you? What have they said your strengths are? If you can't remember - ask them!

### MY POSITIVE QUALITIES...

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You may also wish to record this information in a special diary or journal, one which is dedicated especially to this task. Set aside specific time to fill it in. Remember to include everything no matter how small, insignificant or unimportant you think they are. Each day, or whenever you begin to feel down about yourself, read over your list and remind yourself of your positive qualities, the things that you like about yourself, and the things that other people have told you they like and admire about you.

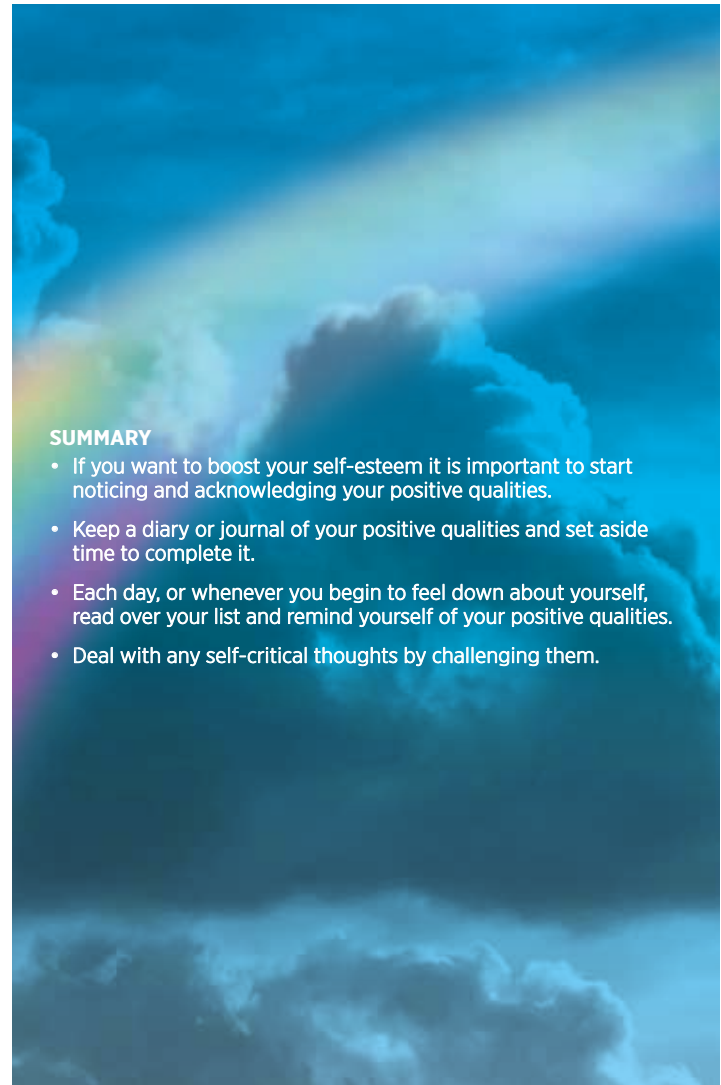


### STOP & THINK

Another way to ensure that you are noticing and acknowledging your positive qualities regularly is to record some of the things that you do each day in which you have shown a positive quality. Give it a go. You may wish to use a journal such as the one below.

DAY / DATE	WHAT I DID	POSITIVE QUALITIES SHOWN
Thurs, 7th Aug	Called my friend who is going through a bad time. Offered advice. Arranged to meet up with her.	Caring, considerate, good friend, helpful

When you are completing activities related to your positive qualities, watch out for that 'inner critic' saying things such as 'stop showing off', 'anyone could've done that', 'it's wrong to be so smug', or 'that quality is too ordinary to be worth considering'.



### SUMMARY

- If you want to boost your self-esteem it is important to start noticing and acknowledging your positive qualities.
- Keep a diary or journal of your positive qualities and set aside time to complete it.
- Each day, or whenever you begin to feel down about yourself, read over your list and remind yourself of your positive qualities.
- Deal with any self-critical thoughts by challenging them.



## SECTION 6: REVIEW

As you continue working on your self-esteem, remember to stop and see how you are doing. You will be using a lot of new skills and these require practice. It's always good to step back sometimes and say "how's it actually going?"

One way of doing this is keeping track of past experiences – times when you did well, times when you did less well, what you have tried and how you got on.

It is important to be realistic about your progress. It will take time to increase your self-esteem and to notice changes in it. Things will not run smoothly all of the time. You may find yourself in a muddle and face some setbacks; this is to be expected and they can teach you about what you can do differently next time.

Improving your self-esteem should be seen as a long-term goal. It will take practice and effort over time. You may well face setbacks and have bad days, but you can try to accept these as normal and learn from them to keep you moving forwards.

If you feel that, having tried the ideas in this booklet, you are making little progress, you may wish to contact your GP for further help and support. You can also contact Wellbeing Services on 0141 232 2555. Alternatively, more information and self-help material can be found on our website at: [www.wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk](http://www.wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk)





## Further help and information

For more information or advice please contact Wellbeing Services on **0141 232 2555** or visit the website **[www.wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk](http://www.wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk)**

Wellbeing Services is a Primary Care Mental Health Team based in the South of Glasgow. Wellbeing Services offer a variety of services to assist people with common mental health problems and helps them see a brighter tomorrow.



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