

Handout for

DEPRESSION

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DEPRESSION

You may be taking *medication* to help reduce symptoms of depression like fatigue, poor sleep, appetite loss, poor concentration and excessive crying. Medication is a necessary part of treatment for many people. In fact, any depressive symptoms that would interfere with your ability to function at home or work would *also* interfere with your ability to participate meaningfully in psychotherapy. An appropriate medication can help you while you use psychotherapy to work on making the enduring changes in your thinking and behavior that can make future episodes of depression less likely. *Please discuss any questions you have about your medication with the physician prescribing it.*

The most noticeable thing about depression is often the *mood*, which is usually one of *sadness* and *despair*, and sometimes desperation, irritability, guilt, shame or even emotional numbness. But mood is only one of *four* aspects of depression. The other three are **biology**, **thinking** and **behavior**. These four aspects of depression *influence each other*, so *improvement* in one leads to improvement in the others, while *worsening* in one leads to worsening in the others. There is not much we can do to change mood *directly*, but we can do many things to improve mood *indirectly* by changing our *biology, thinking and behavior*.

Thinking

Biology

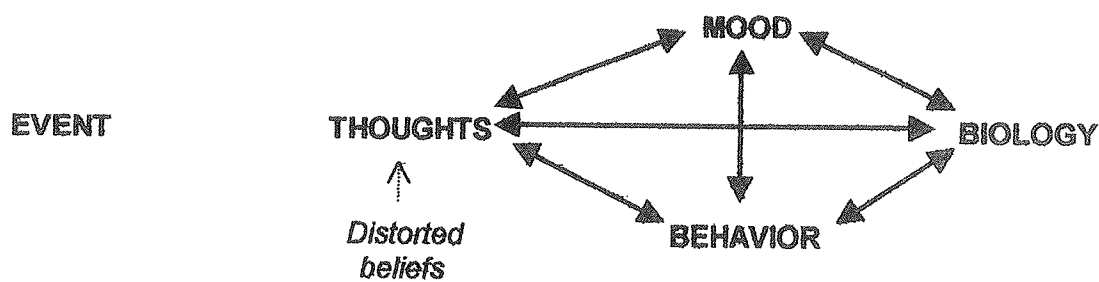
Behavior

Mood

- **Thinking** In depression, your thinking becomes dominated by unpleasant, disturbing thoughts about yourself and your life. These thoughts result from relying on various *distorted beliefs* to make *sense* of your experiences. This problem can be addressed by identifying your depressive *thoughts* and counteracting the distorted *beliefs* driving those thoughts.
- **Behavior** Depression leads you to become *inactive* and to *withdraw* from other people. Depression is also associated with a lack of ability to assert yourself, to let other people know your needs, feelings and decisions in a clear, respectful way. These behavior problems partly result from distorted thinking. *Withdrawal, inactivity and lack of assertiveness* can be addressed counteracting the distorted thinking behind these problems and by developing assertiveness behavior.
- **Biology** Depression can cause *fatigue*. It can cause *loss of appetite* (even though you may lose weight or eat compulsively and *gain* weight). It can cause you to *sleep* too little or too much. It can disrupt your concentration and memory. These problems are addressed mainly with *medication*. They can also be reduced significantly by physical exercise (e.g., a brisk 30-minute walk three times a week) and better eating and sleeping habits.

Depressed Mood and Depressive Thoughts

Our emotions and moods result *not* from events we experience but from *thoughts* triggered by such events. Depressed *moods* and depressive *thoughts* actually *cause—and amplify—each other*. When you're depressed, you often react to ordinary events and situations with a flood of painful thoughts. These thoughts quickly affect your *mood*, your *behavior* and the *biological* functions of your body. In fact, these thoughts, mood, behavior and biological changes affect *each other*. All of this is shown in the following diagram.



Changing depressed moods requires changing depressive thoughts. This handout and group will help you learn how to do this.

To get a useful sample of the thoughts that tend to trigger *your* depressed moods, you'll need to observe and record some things about yourself. Each day for one week, *write down* the thoughts that you have *just before* you feel the painful sadness (or anger or fear) of a depressed mood.

If you notice that a depressed mood occurs soon *after* some event happens or *during* some situation, write down that event or situation. The events and situations that trigger depressive thoughts are usually things you'd expect, like setbacks, frustrations and disappointments—but sometimes they are things you *wouldn't* expect, like getting a compliment or invitation, being told "I love you," asking someone for help or being asked for help.

Here is the most important idea behind this handout and the group:

Although depressive thoughts are often *triggered* by events or situations, they are not *justified* or *explained* by those events or situations. The main *cause* of depressive thoughts is *distorted beliefs*—unrealistic, unreasonable ideas you've used for years to make sense of your experiences. The best way to weaken these unhealthy ideas is by using *healthy* ideas designed to *counteract* them. Once you identify the kinds of distorted beliefs *you* have relied on in your life, you can work on gradually replacing them with *reasonable, realistic* ones.

Counteracting Distorted Beliefs Behind Depressive Thoughts

Once you identify the depressive thoughts that tend to trigger your painful moods, you must confront the deeper, distorted beliefs that *lead* you to have those thoughts. The following chart gives you some guidelines for doing this.

These depressive thoughts usually result from relying on these distorted beliefs:	You can gradually counteract these distorted beliefs by always challenging them using ideas like the ones below.
<p>I'm <i>unlovable</i>.</p> <p>I'm a <i>failure</i>.</p> <p>I'm <i>stupid</i>.</p> <p>I'm <i>worthless</i>.</p>	<p>I have to be <i>perfect</i> in ability and stamina.</p> <p>If I need help or change my mind, I'm stupid.</p> <p>When a failure, setback or disappointment occurs, or someone is upset, <i>I'm</i> responsible for it.</p>	<p>I don't have to be perfect in order to be <i>happy, competent, productive</i> or <i>successful</i>. I want <i>progress</i>, not perfection.</p> <p>Not one of the people <i>I admire</i> most is perfect.</p> <p><i>I accept others</i> who aren't perfect, and <i>they</i> can accept <i>me</i>.</p> <p>A mistake is something I <i>do</i>, not something I <i>am</i>.</p> <p>If I <i>combine all</i> my successes <i>and</i> mistakes, I have a respectable "batting average."</p> <p><i>Other</i> people, events and conditions <i>besides me</i> influence the way things turn out. I need to remind myself of them.</p> <p><i>Each</i> person is responsible for his/her <i>own</i> emotional reaction to things. People get upset for all kinds of reasons that have nothing to do with <i>me</i>.</p>
I've been <i>rejected</i> .	Any person who chooses not to be with me is <i>rejecting</i> me.	A person who chooses not to be with me does so for various <i>reasons that I'll never know</i> . That choice reflects more about the <i>other person</i> than it does about me. People are not like fruit, where rotten pieces are "rejected" and fresh ones are "chosen." The pain I feel is <i>disappointment</i> , which I can learn to bear.
I'm to <i>blame</i> .	<p>Any bad thing that happens is someone's <i>fault</i>.</p> <p>When something goes wrong, <i>I</i> must criticize myself <i>before others</i> do it to me—so that <i>they won't</i>.</p>	<p>Blaming never <i>solves</i> any problem or <i>improves</i> anything—it just makes my life into one long courtroom trial. Whenever I've been <i>part</i> of some problem, I can also be <i>part</i> of the solution.</p> <p><i>I can't</i> read minds or see the future, and I don't have to <i>wound myself</i> with criticism to "prevent" attacks from others. I'll <i>keep quiet</i> when I <i>expect</i> criticism, so I can see that attacks usually <i>don't</i> come.</p>
Other people just <i>pity</i> me.	I can't accept compliments because they express pity ... and others will then expect more than I can do and I'll just let them down.	My own uneasiness is no indicator of anyone else's insincerity. I can't read minds. And simply thanking someone for a compliment shows <i>respect</i> , not arrogance—and it <i>doesn't</i> "obligate" me to do more and better.
I'm <i>lazy</i> .	If I'm not productive, I'm lazy.	I'm not a machine. I'm worth much more than what I can "produce." I have value because I'm a human being.
I'm a big <i>disappointment</i> to others.	<p>If I don't please others, they'll <i>reject</i> me.</p> <p>Anyone who <i>corrects</i> me must think I'm a real <i>loser</i>.</p>	<p>I can help people, using my best judgement, but acting like a slave or a vending machine and desperately giving in to others never benefits <i>anyone</i>.</p> <p>Someone who corrects me is giving me an <i>opportunity</i> to</p>

I'm <i>selfish</i> .	<p>If I express anger in any way, it's <i>wrong</i>—and I'll <i>hurt</i> someone or <i>humiliate</i> myself.</p> <p>If I express my own needs, it's <i>selfish</i>.</p>	<p><i>improve</i>—and showing <i>confidence</i> in my ability to learn. Anger is an emotional signal that I don't like what's going on. I can learn how to express this clearly and respectfully.</p> <p>My needs are as important as anyone else's. In <i>good</i> relationships, there's a <i>balance</i> among these needs.</p>
I can't do <i>anything</i> right.	<p>Things in this world are "black-and-white." They're either wonderful or terrible, right or wrong, worthwhile or useless. Only <i>extreme</i> words can express how badly I feel—words like <i>always</i>, <i>nobody</i>, <i>everybody</i>, <i>never</i>, <i>nothing</i>, <i>everything</i>.</p>	<p><i>Extreme</i> language prevents me from seeing the "big picture" of my life. Many things are <i>not</i> just "black-and-white," and I can allow for some "middle ground" or "shades of gray." My thinking will be more balanced if I don't let any <i>one event or situation</i> reflect badly on my <i>entire</i> life.</p> <p>I may have just done something poorly, but I've done it well before and I can again. I've done other things well today. My mistakes are opportunities to learn and improve.</p>
I've wasted my <i>whole</i> life.		<p>I've done plenty of worthwhile things in the past and I'll do more in the future. Right now I'm trying to learn how to handle depression.</p>
<i>Nobody</i> likes me.		<p>Someone can dislike something I <i>do</i> and still like me <i>as a person</i>. People <i>show</i> me they like me by <i>spending time with me</i>—voluntarily.</p> <p>There are people I dislike, and <i>they've</i> survived. If someone chooses not to be with me, that reflects just as much about the <i>other person</i> as it does about me. I'm not responsible for that person's choices. The disappointment does hurt, but I'll survive it.</p>
My life is totally <i>out of control</i> .		<p>I can't control my <i>emotions</i>, and they can be very uncomfortable, but I <i>am</i> in control of my <i>actions</i> and my <i>decisions</i>.</p>
		<p>OTHER IDEAS FOR CHALLENGING DISTORTED BELIEFS</p> <p>Just because I've <i>always assumed</i> something is true doesn't mean it really <i>is</i> true.</p> <p>Just because <i>someone I loved</i> relied on a certain belief, that doesn't <i>make</i> it valid, and it doesn't mean I have to.</p> <p>The experiences I've had that <i>contradict</i> this belief make it <i>less</i> valid. This belief ignores a lot of facts.</p> <p>I <i>don't</i> apply this belief to <i>others</i> as I do to <i>myself</i>. That makes no sense if the belief is supposed to be valid.</p> <p>There are ways that this belief goes <i>against common sense</i>.</p>

Don't forget ...

Although depression does not affect your ability to notice and remember *unpleasant* things in your life, there is good evidence that it *weakens* your ability to notice and remember *pleasant* things.

There's much more going on in your **current** experiences than the unpleasant things you might notice.

There's much more that occurred in your **past** than the unpleasant things you might remember.

Counteracting Depressive Thoughts that lead to Withdrawal and Inactivity

When you're depressed, it's natural to try to *minimize* your emotional pain by *withdrawing* from others and becoming *inactive*. However, this only leads you to feel *worse*. Several common reasons why people think withdrawing and doing nothing will minimize pain are given in the left side of the chart below. To the right of each reason are ways to *challenge* and *disprove* it.

These beliefs ... can be counteracted by taking these steps:

"I can't enjoy anything."	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. List some simple activities you used to enjoy but have stopped doing. 2. <i>Just before</i> doing each one, rate the degree of <i>pleasure</i> you are feeling, on a scale of 0 (none) to 10 (ecstasy). Then do the activity. 3. <i>Right after</i> completing the activity, rate your pleasure level <i>again</i>. 4. <i>Any</i> increase on the scale is evidence that you <i>can</i> enjoy things. Watch for "spoiler thoughts," the irrelevant "reasons" you might think of to dismiss your enjoyment.
"I'll feel worse if I become active and start doing things."	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. List some simple activities you avoid doing. 2. <i>Just before</i> doing each one, rate your mood on a scale of -10 (unbearably depressed) through 0 (neutral) to +10 (euphoric). Then do the activity. 3. <i>Right after</i> completing the activity, rate your mood <i>again</i>. 4. <i>Any</i> change in the <i>positive</i> direction—or even <i>no</i> change at all—disproves this depressive thought. And remember, a day of inactivity leads to a <i>worse</i> mood, because you'll use your day of doing nothing as "proof" that you're "lazy" and "worthless."
"I'm too tired and weak to do anything."	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The only way to test the thought is to <i>do</i> the activity. If it's a long activity, break it down into parts or steps. In fact, keep breaking it down until you get to a step so small it's ridiculous. 2. After doing each activity (or part, or step), compliment yourself. 3. Then admit there's no good reason you can't do the next activity (or part or step), and do it.
"Nothing I do has any effect on my mood."	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. List some pleasant experiences from your past. 2. For each one, rate your mood (-10 to +10), close your eyes and <i>relive</i> that experience in your imagination. 3. <i>Right after</i> doing this, rate your mood <i>again</i>. Any change in your rating is evidence that you <i>are</i> able to influence your mood.
"Nobody will talk to me" (at some social event).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Your own <i>expectations</i> can affect your <i>behavior</i>—without you knowing it. The depressive expectation to be "ignored" would lead you to ... <i>stand off by yourself</i> ... have an <i>unhappy</i> look on your face ... and <i>avoid eye contact</i> with others. To other people, you look <i>angry</i> or <i>antisocial</i>. <i>Of course</i> they avoid you! But you take this as "proof" that "nobody likes" you. 2. Instead of working against yourself, identify how your depressive expectations could influence the way you behave—and <i>plan</i> how to behave <i>differently</i>.
"I'll have to pay for any good times by suffering later."	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This is pure <i>superstition</i>—but it's also an <i>expectation</i> that will ruin your mood and make you <i>misinterpret</i> the first minor annoyance of your day as "just the beginning" of misery. Is this some kind of "punishment"? If so, what's it for? When did it start? How long does it go on? 2. Is it that you don't "deserve" to have good times? Why not? Who <i>does</i> "deserve" it? <i>Why</i>?
"I'll fail at whatever I try."	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Before</i> doing a task, rate how <i>competently</i> you <i>expect</i> to do it, using an imaginary scale of 0 (not well at all) to 10 (as well as it could be done). 2. <i>After</i> doing the task, rate how well you <i>actually did</i> it. Compare your two ratings. 3. In your daily life, this <i>expectation</i> leads you to put <i>less effort</i> into things, so it's <i>no surprise</i> that they turn out <i>less well</i> than you hope.

Here's another thing to keep in mind:

Your withdrawal or inactivity could be related to the ways *others* behave *toward* you. If other people don't *encourage* you to be involved with people, it's *easier* for you to withdraw. Also, if other people do things *for* you

that *you* should do for yourself (even if they mean well), it's *easier* for you to be inactive. If you let these people know this, they'll be more likely to do what helps rather than what hinders.

Counteracting Hopelessness and Suicidal Thinking

The emotional pain of depression—by itself—is not enough to get a person feeling hopeless and thinking about suicide. Feelings of hopelessness and thoughts of suicidal thinking begin only when you believe that ...

you can't bear the pain or you are trapped in the pain or the pain will never end.

Once you view your problem in any of *these* ways, suicide could seem like the only "solution." In fact, suicide *is* always an attempt to solve a problem of some kind. Suicide has even been called "a permanent solution to a temporary problem." But this raises two *hopeful* possibilities: (1) The pain you're in is *not* really permanent, and (2) the situation *you've* defined as the problem is *not* the *real* problem. In other words, either the pain *won't* always be this bad or the *real* problem is one that can be solved by something better than suicide. Below are examples.

What the problem seems to be:	What the <i>real</i> problem might be:	Ways of dealing with the real problem that can create opportunities and hope:
"I've lost my reason for living."	I had a reason for living <i>before</i> I became depressed—if it <i>was</i> valid, it's <i>still</i> valid. But maybe it was <i>flimsy</i> , and it collapsed when <i>people or circumstances changed</i> . Was it a <i>relationship</i> ? An <i>ability, job or role</i> I used for my identity and self-esteem? A misguided <i>dream</i> of someday getting approval, acceptance or praise from someone?	Losing a job, a relationship, a certain level of health or lifestyle <i>is</i> very painful but, with some help from others, I can figure out a way to carry on with my life. My pain presents me with an <i>opportunity</i> to look for a more valid, meaningful reason for living. I could talk to people who seem to have one. My despair may reflect a spiritual crisis that I need to address. I've always assumed that I can be happy <i>only</i> if my circumstance or relationships <i>stay the same</i> . I've always assumed that things in my life can work out only one certain way in order for me to be happy. How can I be so sure of that?
"I'm a burden to others."	I've assumed that other people are "victims" of my problems. Actually, <i>I'm</i> the one who has <i>been</i> "burdened" for so long—by <i>my own efforts to take care of everyone else</i> .	People <i>choose</i> to care, because they are <i>human beings</i> . I'm not forcing <i>anyone</i> to do or feel <i>anything</i> . They care—as <i>I</i> would. I'm <i>not</i> responsible for the <i>happiness</i> of others. I <i>don't</i> know what's "best" for everyone. Doing things for others doesn't mean <i>my own</i> needs go unmet. I'll challenge my <i>reasons</i> for trying to take care of everyone. I'll set reasonable limits on what I'm willing to do. I'll learn how to say "No."
"I'm trapped, and I can't escape."	<i>I've</i> actually "trapped" <i>myself</i> for years in a severely limiting <i>role</i> that hinders me from seeking support and setting limits—like saying "No" to people who mistreat me or exploit me. I've also "trapped" (and limited) <i>myself</i> by believing that I have no right to <i>change my mind</i> or <i>my plans</i> when I see fit.	I'm not responsible for the happiness of others. I'm going to work on breaking out of any self-defeating role I've been playing with others. I'll give myself permission to change <i>my mind</i> when I need to. Changing my mind doesn't mean I don't know what I'm doing. It just shows that <i>I learn from my experiences</i> .
"I'm all alone, with"	Other people should somehow just know how I hurt and what I need. I shouldn't have to tell	There are people around me willing and able to give me support. I need to <i>ask</i> for it, because nobody can read minds.

<p>nobody to help me.” “Nothing will ever change.”</p> <p>“My life is a mess.”</p>	<p>them.</p> <p>When I’m feeling <i>helpless</i>, I lose sight of the changes I <i>can</i> make—changes that can affect my <i>situation</i> and my <i>mood</i>.</p> <p>Many things in my life are not the way I want them to be. But each of the activities and relationships in my life is unique, and I can work on making changes in each of them, one day at a time.</p>	<p>But I <i>won’t</i> keep asking people who’ve only <i>let me down</i>—and I’ll stop telling myself, “That’s all I “deserve.”</p> <p>I’ll practice <i>noticing</i> how my thoughts and feelings gradually change <i>by themselves</i> over time—the pleasant <i>and</i> unpleasant ones. I’ll record these changes in writing, as they happen, hourly or daily.</p> <p>I’ll recall how I <i>coped in the past</i> with pain that seemed overwhelming, because I can either do the <i>same thing</i> now or learn from that experience and try <i>something better</i> this time.</p> <p>I’ll gain some control over my situation and mood by <i>changing my behavior</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I’ll learn new skills for relationships/work/recreation. • I’ll start <i>asking for help</i> from other people. I’ll change any self-defeating role that keeps me from doing this. • I’ll <i>set limits</i> for myself and say “No” to some people. • I’ll take a pleasure trip, or just a day or two off. • I’ll leave the house for a few hours. • I’ll walk away from difficult people—or plan not to be with them in the first place. • I’ll call someone I haven’t talked with in a long time. <p>I’ll gain some control over my situation and mood by <i>changing unrealistic expectations</i> that have kept me stuck waiting for things that <i>won’t happen</i>—and things I <i>don’t</i> really need in order to be happy or secure. I’ve suffered enough frustration and disappointment waiting for them. I’m going to stop acting as if my life will “finally” be the way I want it ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>If</i> I can just <i>please</i> my mother, father, spouse, children, boss, friend, etc. • <i>If</i> I can just be good enough—or perfect—at doing things. • <i>If</i> I can just <i>hold</i> my family/department/friends <i>together</i>. • <i>If</i> I can just get <i>enough</i> attention or praise. <p>I’ll <i>make myself less vulnerable</i> to unpleasant moods, by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting at least seven or eight hours of sleep each day. • Eating three healthy meals a day. • Exercising (e.g., a 30-40 minute walk 3 times a week). • Eliminating alcohol/drug use. • Engaging in meaningful, constructive activities.
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Interpersonal Roles that Contribute to Depression

An interpersonal “role” is a consistent, predictable way of relating to other people. A role involves specific behaviors and specific beliefs about those behaviors.

When playing a role, you act in certain ways and you *avoid* acting in certain other ways. Usually a *belief* drives you to play a particular role. You might believe that playing the role will benefit someone or serve some useful purpose. You might believe that *not* playing the role will result in some kind of problem or catastrophe (for

which you would be responsible). You may have never openly acknowledged these beliefs to others—or even to yourself.

In general, playing a role is not a problem if (1) you *know* that you're playing it, (2) you have a legitimate *reason* for playing it and (3) you are able to relate to people in *other* ways besides the role.

A role is a problem when you become *stuck* in it (and it's practically the *only* way you relate to others), or you do it *compulsively* (believing that you can never choose *not* to do it at any time).

Interpersonal roles can contribute to the development—and continuation—of depression, in various ways:

- Depression can develop because your role has not allowed you to get any of your *own needs* met.
- Depression can develop when your *identity* and *self-esteem* are based on the role and it becomes *unnecessary* or you become *unable* to play it. You may also *fear* making the necessary transition to a *new* role.
- Depression can develop if you become convinced that you have *failed* to play a role well enough.
- Depression can develop when your *anger* over playing a role becomes too strong to hide but too frightening to face. You might re-direct the anger toward *yourself* (e.g., self-blame) or shut off *all* emotions (and feel *nothing*).

Below are some interpersonal roles often played by people who develop depression. Although it's possible to play more than one role, people usually play one more than any other. Do you play any?

1. **The Strong One.** You're the one everyone seems to come to for help—advice, time, labor, money and emotional support. You give people what they want or need even before they ask for it. You believe you know what's best for everyone, and you act like it. You also believe you should never cry, and never say "I'm tired" or "I don't know," (because that would show "weakness"). You consider your *own* needs too "burdensome" to others. You believe that if you play this role long enough and well enough, someday people will realize what *your* needs are and satisfy them—or at least express deep appreciation.
2. **The Rescuer.** You view various other adults as underdogs or victims. You step in to prevent them from experiencing pain—even when the pain is a direct result of their own foolish choices. You always defend someone when others talk about him/her. You try to protect someone from mistreatment by another person. You make excuses for the person. You bail him/her out of difficult situations. You believe that if you do this well enough, this person will somehow turn into a responsible, capable person.
3. **The Linchpin.** You're always trying to hold some group of people together—your family, your workplace, your friends. You often allow them to communicate with each other *through you*. You take it upon yourself to organize all the get-togethers. You believe this can eventually create one big harmonious group. You believe that if you don't play this role the group will "fall apart"—and that it will be *your* fault.
4. **The Peacemaker.** You get involved with others whenever they seem to be in conflict. You try to get everyone to calm down and get along. You believe that if you don't do this, people will get out of control and hurt each other or be alienated permanently.
5. **The Pleaser-Appearer.** You try to make certain people happy or keep them from getting upset. You give them their way and you don't refuse to do anything you think they want. You believe that if you can make them happy, you'll finally be happy and secure, or that if they get upset they will "reject" you.
6. **The Scapegoat.** You allow others to mistreat you in various ways. They blame you for things that are not your fault. They compare you unfavorably to others. They insult you. They exclude you. You frequently apologize for yourself. You believe that, for some reason, you sort of "deserve" all this.

Playing these roles does *not* accomplish what you hope for, and the "risks" of *not* playing a role are as exaggerated as the "benefits." Start working your way *out* of the role by answering these questions:

- What clear evidence do you have that playing this role has ever really *benefited* you or anyone else?
- What clear evidence do you have that something bad will happen if you *stop* playing the role? And even if it did happen, would that really be *harmful* or *unbearable*?

It may *seem* like other people "need" you to play your role, but it's more likely that you've simply made their lives *more convenient* by playing it. You've probably played the role because *you* feel a need to. Perhaps it has enabled you to avoid facing painful feelings of anger, shame, fear or grief. Consider working on this issue in more depth with your individual therapist.

Developing Assertive Behavior for *Seeking Help* and *Setting Limits*

What is assertiveness?

Assertiveness is a skill for communicating your thoughts and feelings to others. Depression is often associated with a *lack* of this skill. After all, if you can't *let others know what you need* from them or *set limits* on what you're willing to *do* or *tolerate*, you'll feel *helpless* to change anything in your life and *hopeless* about your future. You're also likely to become passive and resentful.

Assertiveness involves *expressing your thoughts and feelings to people in a clear and respectful way*. This definition rests on two assumptions. First, "expressing your thoughts" means using *words* (because "hinting" is useless). Second, being "respectful" means communicating in a way that would be acceptable to any *reasonable* person. If someone becomes upset over your message, it doesn't prove that *you* did something "wrong." In face-to-face communication, you can be confident that you *are* being respectful by communicating in these ways:

- Approach the other person *privately*, not in front of others.
- Maintain eye contact while speaking.
- Speak as *calmly* as you can.
- Allow the other person to respond—*without* interrupting.
- Don't *accuse, blame* or use name-calling.
- Deal with the other person's behavior—*not* with personality, attitudes or motives.

Anyone who resists *this* kind of approach is probably unable or unwilling to deal with what you have to say. If so, just drop the subject and try again another time. It's a fact of life that you can't *make* a successful dialogue happen alone. You can't control other people, only yourself. In fact, "successful" assertiveness involves simply *saying what you need to say*—cooperation from others is a *bonus*. So, assertiveness helps you maintain *self-control*. It takes nothing away from others, and it forces nothing upon them. It involves *not* surrendering *your own* power to others.

Why is it often difficult to behave assertively?

Obstacles within us. The obstacles *within* us are usually distorted, self-defeating *beliefs*, which become "reasons" *not* to act assertively. They must be challenged and disproved. Which ones below have you relied on?

- Other people should just *know* how I feel and what I need without me having to *tell* them.
- I should never question the opinions or decisions of others.
- *My* needs are too much of a *burden* to others.
- *My* needs are not as *important* as those of other people.
- If someone gets *upset* with something *I* say, I must be wrong or rude.

Here are some things people often have difficulty asserting. Once you identify the ones that are difficult for you, we can discuss them in the group and work on some ways to express them to the people in your life.

- Asking someone for help
- Stating your opinion—especially if it differs from someone else's
- Dealing with someone who does not cooperate with you
- Asking someone to stop doing something that bothers you.
- Responding to undeserved criticism
- Responding to unreasonable demands, and setting limits.
- Expressing confusion—and asking for clarification—about what others want from you
- Asking for a date to be set for a meeting or deadline
- Asking someone to correct a mistake that has affected you.
- Setting limits on what you'll tolerate (e.g., telling someone how you'll respond, in your own behalf, the next time he/she does something offensive that you've already asked him/her to stop).

Obstacles around us. The obstacles *around* us are usually difficult people who *challenge* or *resist* your assertive behavior. Such people are trying to *avoid* dealing with the matter you've brought up. In the chart below, the common ways other people might challenge your assertiveness are on the left side. To the right of each challenge are *comebacks* you can use to respond to it.

Ways that someone might challenge what you say	"Comebacks" you can use to return to your point
1. You ask a person to stop a bothersome behavior, and he/she says something irrelevant as if it explains or excuses that behavior.	"I hear what you're saying, but my <i>point</i> is (repeat your initial statement)." Don't waste time asking what the irrelevant statement meant.
2. The other person makes a joke of what you said.	"I think the joking is getting us <i>off the point</i> , which is (repeat your initial statement)."
3. When you ask a person to stop doing something that bothers you, he/she responds by complaining about something you do.	"It looks like we <i>each</i> want some changes, but we can only deal with <i>one</i> thing at a time. Do <i>you</i> want to go first or should I?"
4. The person delays giving you a response, claiming to be too tired or busy.	"OK. Let's <i>set a time</i> when we can deal with this." (If the person refuses to set another time ...) "I'll get back to you."
5. The person questions why you feel uncomfortable about something you've asked him/her to stop doing, or why you're bringing the matter up now.	"The question of <i>why</i> or <i>when</i> is <i>beside the point</i> . I'd like you to take what I'm saying just for what it is. I'm being as clear as I can."
6. The person acts hurt or wounded by what you've said, as if you made an attack—so that you'll feel so guilty that you'll drop it.	"I know this is difficult for you, but I've brought it up for the sake of our relationship, and I'm confident you can handle it."
7. The person responds to what you've said by saying something that sounds like a threat—so that you'll feel so fearful (of what might happen) that you'll drop the matter.	"That <i>sounds</i> like a threat—is it?" (If the person says "No" ...) "Then I'm confused over why you would say it." (and <i>look</i> confused) (If the person says "You can take it any way you want" ...) "In that case, I <i>won't</i> take it <i>seriously</i> ." (If the person says "Yes" ...) "Do you really want us to deal with each other using <i>threats</i> ?" ... or, in a workplace, "Could you put that in <i>writing</i> ? If not, I'll send it to <i>you</i> in a memo for <i>written confirmation</i> ."
8. When you ask a person to stop doing something that bothers you, he/she denies ever having done it.	"OK. How would you like me to let you know the next time I <i>think</i> it's happening?"

Remember, the purpose of a comeback is to politely *return to your point*, not to retaliate. Comebacks sometimes must be repeated (in the exact same words) until the other person listens, refuses to listen, or leaves.

If a comeback doesn't work after a couple of attempts, bring things to a close by saying, "Here's what I need from you. Would you be willing to do this?" Take any response other than a "Yes" as a "No."

Last but not least ...

Always be ready to reinforce cooperation. That is, whenever the other person *listens* to you, *accepts* what you say or *does* what you ask, be sure to express appreciation.