

Is happiness really a STATE OF MIND?

Negative self-talk is most people's worst emotional habit. Now, a new book promises to teach you healthy thinking - and protect you from depression. Stephanie Merritt puts it to the test

Photographs CAROLYN BARBER

Stress and anxiety, depression's two trusty sidekicks, are so common among busy women that we barely even consider them medical conditions. For many of us, they're just part of the fabric of life. But if you've ever lain awake at night feeling guilty about spreading yourself too thinly or not giving enough to your friends/children/partner/job; if you've ever felt exhausted and unable to cope with all the demands on you, or worried yourself sick about decisions;



if you spend too much time brooding about past mistakes or fretting about the future, or you feel compelled to live up to impossible standards, then you could be at risk of depression.

You may have read this far and thought, 'Well, I'm not depressed'. But many of us - myself included, for many years - often wrongly think of 'depression' only in its most extreme form: lying in a dark room staring at the wall, unable to get out of bed, maybe even having suicidal thoughts. But while that kind of severe depression is not so common, many people who would never regard themselves as 'depressed' might suffer symptoms of mild depression.

That's where new book *Beat The Blues* comes in. It's based on the theory that your patterns of negative thinking can contribute - and even lead - to depression. Author Dr Robert Leahy specialises in cognitive therapy. Unlike the traditional image of the psychiatrist's couch, cognitive therapy deals with the here and now. The book helps you to consider your >>

HOW YOUR MIND PLAYS TRICKS ON YOU

DO YOU RECOGNISE YOURSELF IN ANY OF THESE PATTERNS OF DISTORTED THINKING?

- **Mind reading.** Assuming what people think: *He thinks I'm an idiot.*
- **Fortune telling.** Predicting the future negatively: *I won't get that job.*
- **Catastrophising.** Believing what will happen will be so awful you won't be able to stand it: *I couldn't cope if I failed.*
- **Labelling.** Assigning negative traits to yourself: *I'm unattractive.*
- **Shoulds.** Interpreting events in terms of expectations or demands: *I should do well. If I don't, I'm a failure.*
- **Blaming.** Seeing someone else as the source of your feelings: *My parents caused my problems.*
- **Unfair comparisons.** Focusing on others who do better than you: *She's more successful than I am.*

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present situation from different perspectives, with practical ‘homework’ exercises that challenge unhelpful patterns of thinking and behaviour.

TRAGIC-AL THINKING

For me, the book could not have come at a more opportune time. With a history of depression, I’ve had to learn to recognise the warning signs. Though I haven’t had a severe episode since 2006, I’m still vulnerable to pronounced ups and downs, especially when stressed or overstretched.

At the start of last year, work was going well, but I found myself saying yes to everything and taking on too much. This resulted in a stress-related illness that left me in acute physical pain for three months. Although I recovered with treatment, I was then badly behind schedule for the book I was writing.

Rather than admit weakness and tell my publisher I couldn’t make the deadline, I started working around the clock – a bad decision that not only piled on more stress, but meant I was spending all my time in one room with my laptop, telling myself I didn’t have time to see friends, take my son out, or do any of the activities that usually get me outside. This in turn made me feel increasingly isolated and pressurised, less creative, more frustrated, and more and more in danger of falling back into depression. Could *Beat The Blues* make a difference?

HIGH LOW SCORES?

In the introductory chapter, Dr Leahy begins with a test called the Dysfunctional Attitudes Scale. This is a list of 40 statements to which you respond by ticking boxes ranging from ‘Totally agree’ to ‘Totally disagree’. Examples include: ‘It is difficult to be happy unless one is good-looking, intelligent, rich and creative’ (I slightly agreed); ‘I can find happiness without being loved by another person’ (I totally disagreed). The areas you score highly tell you the attitudes most likely to contribute to depression, whether it’s the need for approval, the desire to please people or striving to be perfect.

I was shocked when I forced myself to give honest, instinctive answers, to find how extreme some of my attitudes were. For example, my response to the statement: ‘If I fail at my work then I am a failure as a person’ was, ‘I agree very much’. For me, the highest scores were to do with perfectionism and success, which I could have guessed; what surprised me was the strength of my beliefs.

Next came ‘core beliefs’. When we are stressed or depressed, our negative core beliefs infect our

thinking, like a critical voice whispering in our ear. ‘You lost your job because you’re not as good as other people’, one might say, or, ‘He broke up with you because you’re unlovable’.

Be warned: uncovering the beliefs you didn’t even know you held about yourself can be a painful process. You might want to keep a box of tissues handy. I found it distressing to learn how much pressure I unconsciously put on myself not to fail, how much my self-worth is bound up with achievements and how deeply negative my view of relationships proved to be. The good news is that it’s possible to change your core beliefs by challenging the distorted thinking that’s feeding them.

MIND YOUR THINKING

So, for example, when the man I’d just started dating didn’t call for a week, rather than allowing my thoughts to be sucked into a negative spiral, I consciously tried to stop, observe and consider whether I was falling into patterns of distorted thinking. Instead of: ‘He hasn’t called, because he doesn’t like me’ (pattern: mind-reading), and then leaping to, ‘It never works out for me, all my relationships are disastrous’ (over-generalising; all-or-nothing thinking), then from there to either, ‘That’s it, I’m doomed to be alone forever’ (catastrophising), or, ‘He’s an asshole anyway’ (blaming), I made myself acknowledge that I didn’t have all the facts. I made myself simply stop at, ‘He hasn’t called’, shrug, and make a choice to let go of obsessing, accept uncertainty and get on with what was right in front of me instead. It takes time to change thought patterns – but even the act of recognising when you’ve started obsessing is a step towards breaking the power of those thoughts.

I warmed to this book. Dr Leahy manages to sound authoritative (he is a proper doctor, after all) without overdoing the science or stats, and leavens his advice with humour. Perhaps someone in an advanced state of depression might find the many suggested exercises quite daunting, but the clue is in the title: if you want to be armed against the stresses of everyday life so they don’t drag you down, this is an immensely user-friendly manual. Perhaps most importantly, Dr Leahy encourages you to be a friend to yourself by countering the self-critical voice with a compassionate one. A voice that says the kind of things you might say to a friend who was down. You might feel self-conscious at first, but the simple act of treating myself with kindness, rather than berating myself for not being good enough, really did help to lift my mood. I will certainly be keeping it by my bed and dipping in whenever my negative voice starts up its whispering campaign. ■

Stephanie’s memoir of depression, The Devil Within (Vermilion, £7.99), and Beat the Blues Before They Beat You: How to Overcome Depression by Dr Robert Leahy (Hay House, £10.99) are both out now

