



**Let's Talk Low Self-Esteem:
A Self Help Guide**

Written by Mary Galvin

Let's Talk Low Self-Esteem – A Self Help Guide

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Let's Talk is Gloucestershire's Improving Access to Psychological Therapy (IAPT) Service.

Let's Talk is a free service from the NHS.

We offer short-term talking therapies to people with mild to moderate depression and anxiety.

Our Self Help guides provide an introduction to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy at Step 1 of our programme of support.

The authors have made every effort to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information in this workbook. However, it is not intended to be a substitute for medical advice or treatment. Any person with a condition requiring medical attention should consult a qualified medical practitioner or suitable therapist. Evidence suggests that a self-help material is most effective when you are supported by an appropriately qualified clinician. We strongly advise that when using this workbook you stay in touch with your named clinician. If for any reason you are unable to reach them and you are feeling concerned about your mental health we recommend you go to see your doctor. Other agencies that can help you are listed in the back of this workbook.

For further information please contact:

Let's Talk

2gether NHS Foundation Trust

Rikenel, Montpellier, Gloucester, GL1 1LY

Website: www.talk2gether.nhs.uk

Let's Talk Low Self-Esteem

Managing Low Self-Esteem using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Introduction

The aim of this self-help guide is to help you to identify whether you may be experiencing symptoms of low self-esteem. It also includes a number of helpful steps you may wish to take to manage your symptoms and wellbeing using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

Anybody can experience low self-esteem and levels of severity can vary considerably. You may find that after completing this self-help guide, you wish to develop further strategies for improvement and increase your understanding of Low Self-Esteem. To do this you can contact Let's Talk, Gloucestershire's Free, NHS IAPT Service. We tell you more about this at the end of the leaflet.

If you feel in need of immediate support please contact your GP.

What is low self-esteem?

Low self-esteem can be viewed as a difficulty related to how we think about and value ourselves. The main characteristic of low self-esteem is the belief that we are not good enough as we are. We usually form these ideas about ourselves in our early childhood years, although what happens to us in adulthood can also affect our self-esteem. If we experience negative early experiences such as; rejection, neglect, abuse, criticism and punishment, lack of praise, interest, warmth or acceptance or being the 'odd' one out in your family or school, we are likely to form negative beliefs about ourselves. These beliefs are based on these experiences, such as, 'I am bad', 'I am worthless', 'I am stupid', 'I am not good enough'.

As we go through life we all develop “rules for living”, if we have low self-esteem our “rules for living” are likely to be based on strategies to avoid triggering our low self-esteem. Examples might be; ‘I must always put others first’, ‘If I say what I think, I will be rejected’, ‘Unless I do everything to the highest possible standard, I will achieve nothing’. As we can see these fears and beliefs are likely to increase our anxiety and they can become overwhelming. They can significantly impact on our day to day functioning, causing great distress.

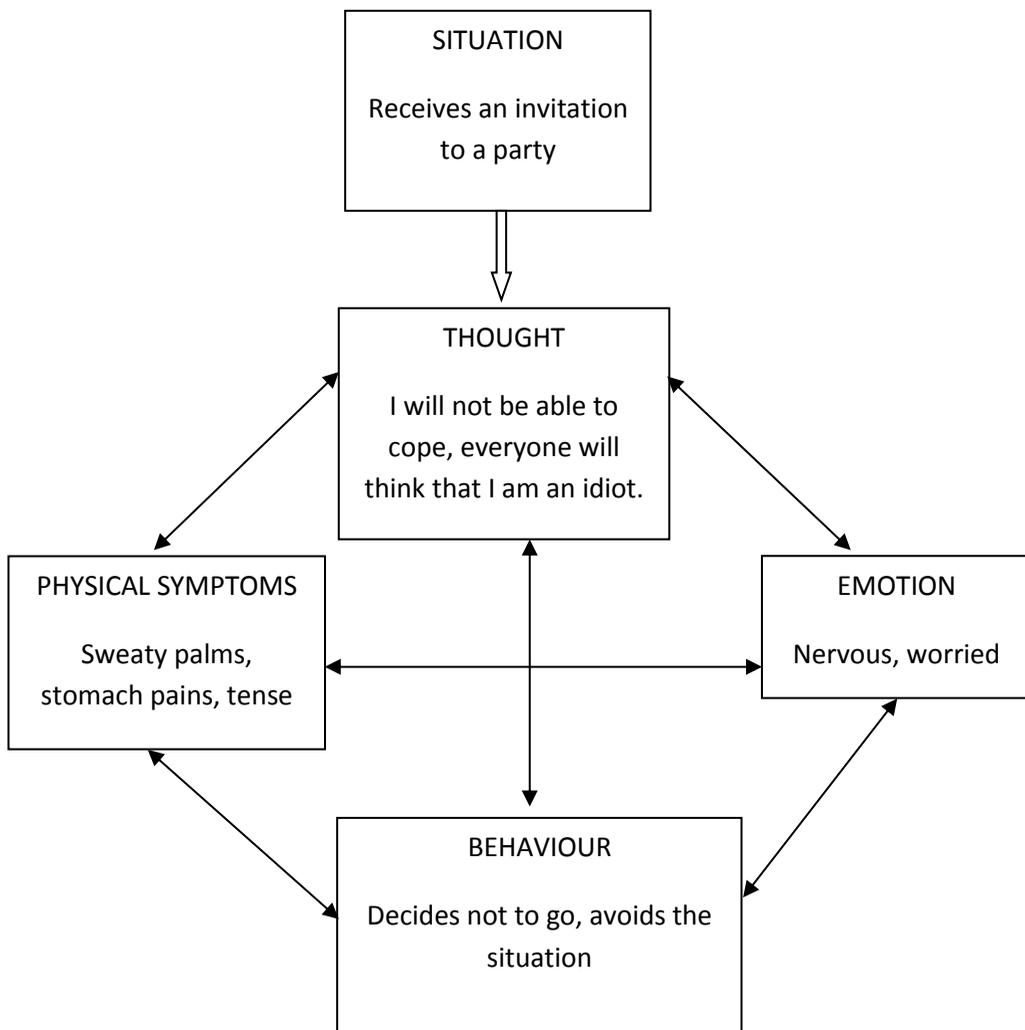
Most people have varying experiences of self-esteem, depending on the situations we are in and the people we are with. Our self-esteem also varies throughout our life span. Hopefully this self-help guide will help you to move forward with your self-esteem and to feel more confident about yourself.

If we have healthy self-esteem we are likely to recognise and to accept our positive qualities and abilities along with our not so positive qualities and so still value and like ourselves. When we have low self-esteem we are more likely to discount our positive qualities, if we recognise them at all, and to focus on our not so positive qualities. Our opinion of ourselves affects our thoughts, feelings and behaviours and how we function on a daily basis.

Our thoughts and worries about ourselves, when we are experiencing low self-esteem, are often centred on a negative perception, or judgement of ourselves, that we believe to be true. This will usually be based on the experiences that we have had in our lives. If these experiences have been negative or undermining then we are likely to form negative and

undermining views of ourselves. How we see ourselves then influences how we think, feel and behave towards ourselves and others, which often reinforces our low self-esteem. This ends up as a vicious cycle.

The vicious cycle of Low Self-esteem



Our self-esteem develops in our early and teenage years and what happened to us and how we were treated during those years will have a significant impact on our self-esteem. For example, if we were listened to and praised we are likely to feel valued and worthwhile, to have good self-esteem. However, if we were ignored, neglected and criticised we are likely to feel less valued and to have low self-esteem.

If we have low self-esteem we are likely to; be self-critical, self-blaming, experience self-doubt, have negative **thoughts** about ourselves, discount praise and compliments, focus on our weaknesses and flaws and struggle to accept ourselves. Low self-esteem can leave us **feeling** sad, anxious, depressed, guilty, worthless, shameful, frustrated, angry, self-conscious and sensitive.

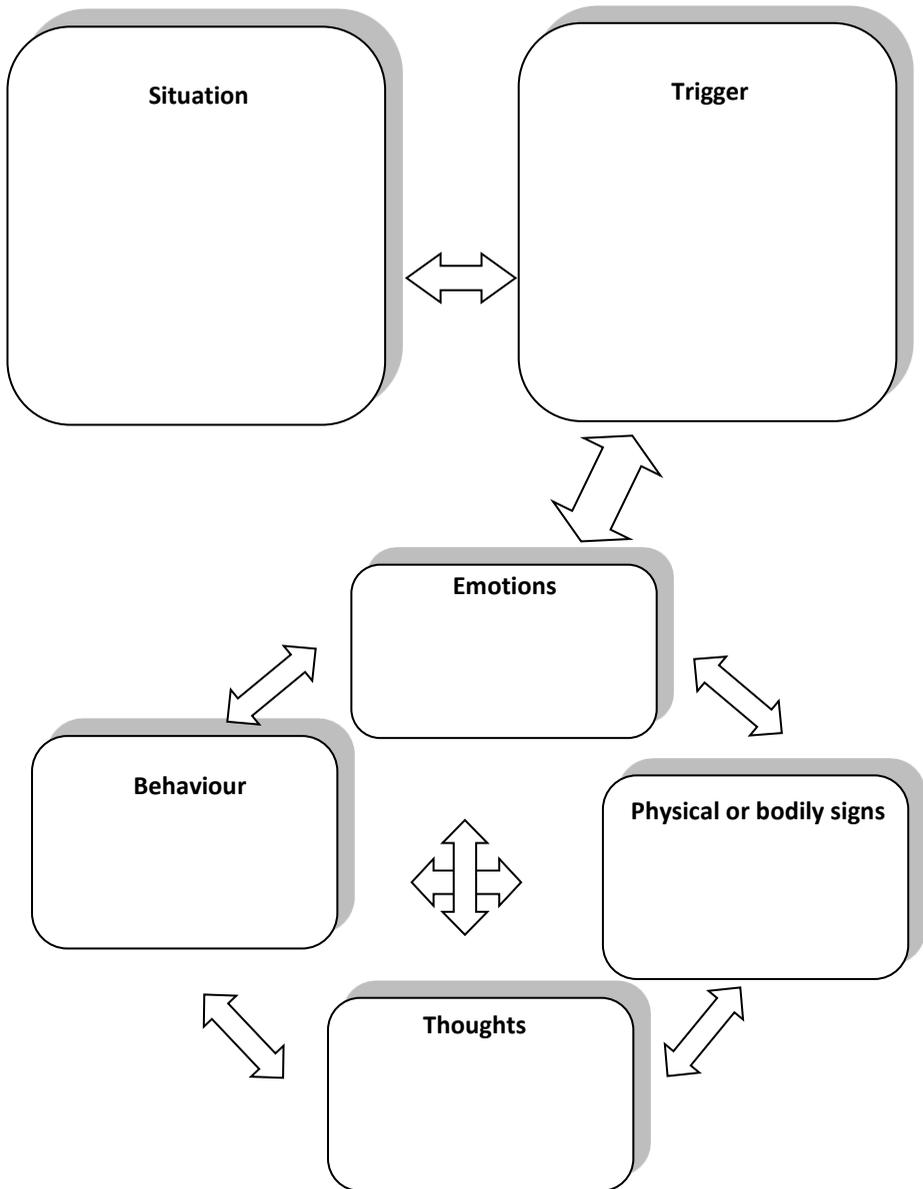
Our **behaviours** are also affected and we are likely to lack assertiveness and an ability to speak out, to have an apologetic stance, to avoid challenges and new experiences, to avoid eye contact, to be shy and withdrawn, to be eager to please or we may overcompensate and be the life and soul of the party and pay excessive attention to our appearance.

Physically we may notice that we are fatigued, have muscular tension, low energy, struggle to concentrate and have disrupted sleeping and eating patterns.

However, we can improve how we feel about ourselves and bring about change by adapting the way that we think about and behave towards ourselves.

The vicious cycle of Low Self-esteem

Prepare your own vicious cycle of Low Self Esteem



Do I have low self-esteem?

People's experience of low self-esteem can vary but there is a range of common symptoms. We may feel that we are not good enough, worry excessively about what others think of us, often jump to the conclusion that we will not be able to do something, think that we are too fat, ugly or old, blame ourselves for things that go wrong even though we may not be responsible, focus on things that have not gone well, feel shameful about ourselves and feel frustrated and angry with ourselves and others.

We may find that we avoid going out and meeting new people, have difficulties with making decisions, strive for perfection in everything that we do, be eager to please others and have others approval, to let opportunities go, such as a promotion or a holiday or we may be hyper sensitive to any form of criticism or perceived rejection.

Quite often we may find that we do things that make us feel even worse about ourselves. For example, my manager points out that I have made a mistake in my job and I think "nothing I ever do is good enough; I am no good at my job. I have to try harder and do better". I begin to feel anxious and my sleep is disrupted and I am less able to concentrate, I make further mistakes and become irritable with others and the thought that "nothing I do is ever good enough" becomes reinforced and confirms the original thoughts, forming a vicious cycle.

What causes Low Self-esteem to develop and how might it affect your life?

When we are growing up, how others respond, react and behave towards us influences how we view and experience ourselves.

Here are some examples of behaviours that are likely to affect our self-esteem in a negative way;

- Being constantly criticised.
- If our needs are ignored and go unmet.
- If we are ignored, abused or neglected.
- If we are bullied and ridiculed.
- If we are different in some way to those around us.
- If we fail to meet parental or peer group standards.
- If we are constantly on the receiving end of other's stress or distress.
- If we do not do so well at school.
- If there is a general absence of positive things such as warmth, interest, praise or affection.

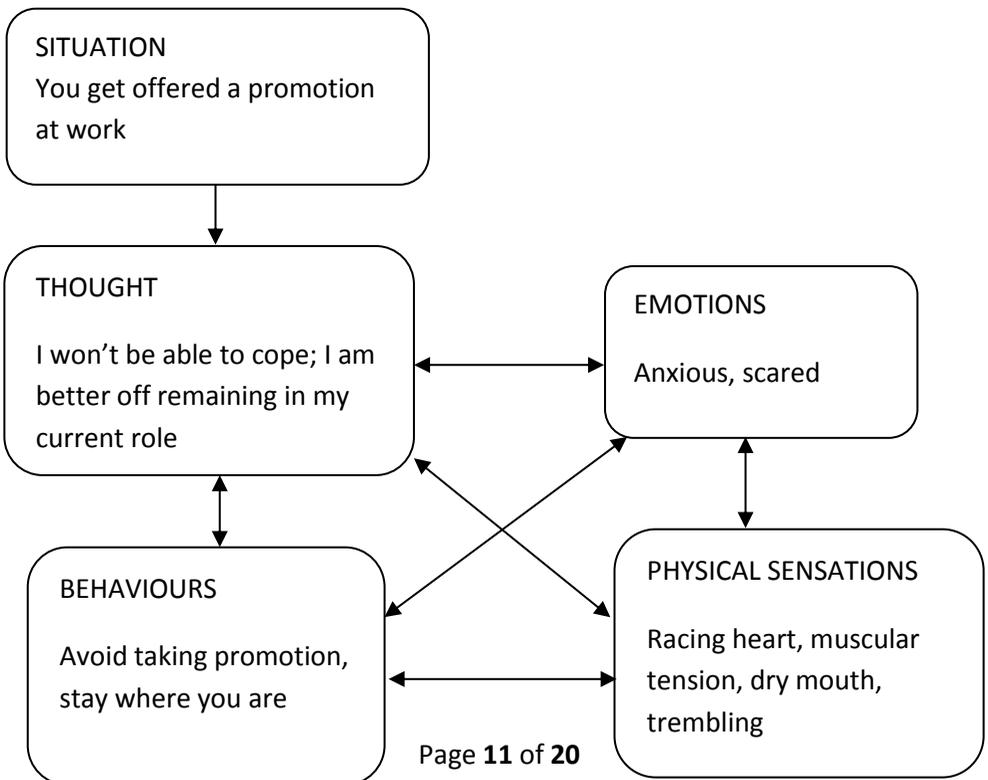
If we experience any of these behaviours then we may begin to form beliefs about ourselves, that we are not as important as others, that we do not match up, that we are not good enough as we are, that we do not deserve to have positive and happy experiences. It is not difficult to understand that if we have beliefs such as these, this will affect how we interact with others and form relationships. It can affect how we take care of ourselves, how we may avoid situations and opportunities,

how we plan our future, how we seek help and support from others and also how much we enjoy our lives.

Low self-esteem can also develop in adulthood if we experience abusive relationships, persisting stress or hardship, exposure to traumatic events or workplace intimidation or bullying for example.

If we have low self-esteem we are also likely to develop unhelpful ways of coping, such as avoidance of new people and opportunities. This reinforces how we feel about ourselves, and we may find ourselves in a vicious cycle which maintains our low self-esteem.

An example of a vicious cycle in low self-esteem which reinforces negative beliefs about ourselves



Can low self-esteem be treated?

In short, yes. One of the main treatments for low self-esteem is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which is a psychological treatment or talking therapy. CBT can help you to manage difficult thoughts, beliefs, feelings and behaviours

What steps can I take to begin to overcome low self-esteem and to feel better ?

When we have low self-esteem we are likely to focus on our weaknesses and qualities that we do not like. So one of the first steps in beginning to tackle low self-esteem is to change our focus and to begin to concentrate on our strengths and qualities that we do like. We do this by recording a daily positive data log of positive things that you have done each day and what this says about you.

POSITIVE DATA LOG

Positive actions I did today	What this says about me
Went for a swim	I am keeping healthy
Cooked a Thai meal	I am an adventurous cook
Helped son with homework	I am a caring parent
Bought flowers	I created a welcoming home

Practise completing your own positive data log:

Positive actions I did today	What this says about me

GET POSITIVE

Write a list of all the things you like about yourself, what you have done well in your life and that you are pleased with, your achievements, tough experiences that you have got through, how you have helped or encouraged others, creative accomplishments and think about what this says about you and write it down.

Practise completing your own positive data log:

My positive attributes and achievements	What this says about me

MINI-SURVEY

Ask your friends, family and trusted work colleagues to identify three of your positive qualities and ask them to write these down for you, as in low self-esteem we tend to focus on what we see as our negative qualities we often may not recognise that others value us and appreciate our personal qualities.

Name	Name three of my positive qualities
Jack – my son	Funny, loving, caring.
Ian – my manager	Hard-working, reliable, intelligent.
Lisa – my friend	Great company, loyal, supportive.
Peter – my boyfriend	Beautiful, genuine, amazing cook

Now practise completing your own mini-survey:

Name	Name three of my positive qualities

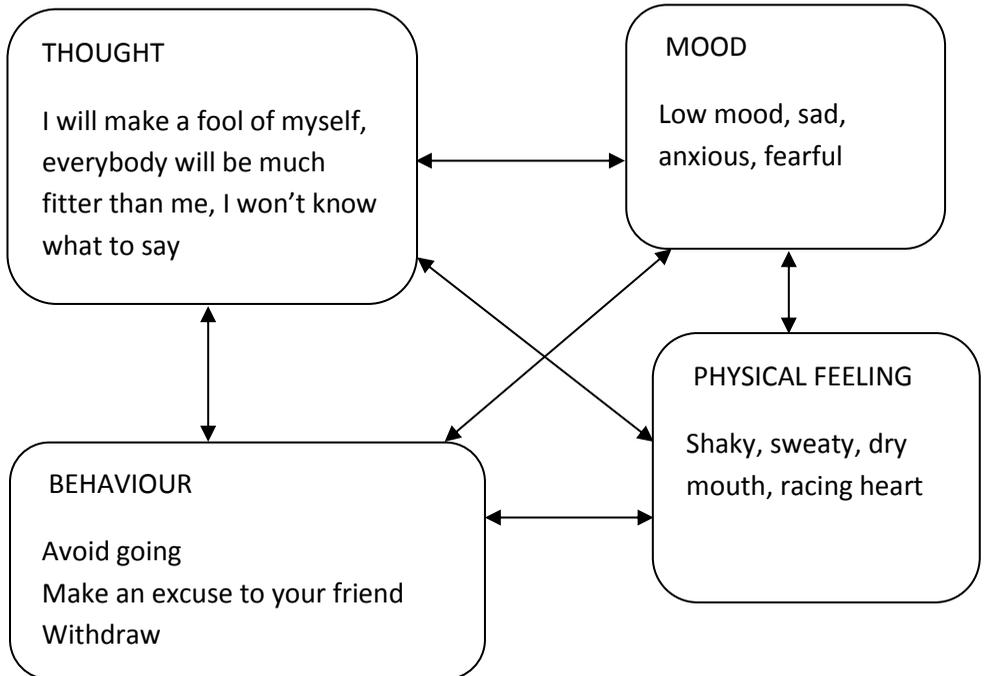
Try keeping this nearby, either on the fridge or on your bedside table. Look at them before you go to sleep each night to help you to focus on the good aspects of each day. Saying them out loud is even more powerful.

CHALLENGE ANXIOUS PREDICTIONS

If we have low self-esteem, new or unfamiliar settings or opportunities can leave us feeling anxious. When we become anxious this affects how we feel, physically and emotionally, how we behave and how we think. Our thinking may become anxious and we begin to make anxious predictions about how we will get on in these new settings and situations. Here is an example;

SITUATION

A friend or work colleague invites you to join a weekly exercise class with them



Begin to notice what you are predicting will happen, when you feel anxious, and begin to notice what precautions or steps you are taking to prevent these predictions from coming true. These are usually safety and avoidance behaviours which we develop to keep ourselves safe and to avoid anxious predictions from happening. Whilst it is understandable that we may choose to avoid attending unfamiliar settings or situations, because we do not like feeling anxious, in the long term this is not a helpful step and actually prolongs our

anxiety. This is because, in not attending the exercise class, as in the example above, we are likely to continue to believe that we will make fools of ourselves in a public place and so continue to avoid opportunities for meeting new people and keeping fit.

Once you begin to notice anxious predictions you can then begin to question and challenge them so that you can develop alternative predictions. Then we encourage you to test them out by participating in some situations that you would normally fear, instead of avoiding them. This is a way of finding out for yourself that your anxious predictions are based on anxiety rather than truth.

See our self-help guide – **Managing Negative Thinking** – To challenge your thinking further.

See our self-help guide – **Behaviour Activation** – To increase your activity levels and improve your mood.

HELPFUL QUESTIONS TO ASK IN FINDING ALTERNATIVES FOR ANXIOUS PREDICTIONS

If we remember that making anxious predictions will affect how we think, feel and behave then hopefully we will see that challenging these anxious predictions is likely to be a helpful exercise:

- **What is the evidence to support what I am thinking?**
What is making you think that the worst will happen ?
Is this linked to earlier or childhood experiences ?
Is it a habit, do you always expect the worst ?

- **What is the evidence against what I am thinking?**
 What is the actual evidence for and against your anxious prediction?
 Have there been any times in the past when you have coped reasonably well in a similar situation?
 What inner resources can you call on to help you in this situation?
- **What alternative views are there?**
 Is there another way of thinking about this situation / are you seeing the full picture?
 If you were not feeling anxious how might you view the situation?
 What would you say to a friend in a similar situation?
 Are you placing too much significance on to the event?
- **What is the worst that can happen?**
 How realistic is this?
 What steps might you take to prevent or minimise the chances of the worst happening?
 If the worst did happen what steps could you take to cope with the situation?
- **What is the best that can happen?**
 Think of an example that is the opposite to your anxious prediction.
 Visualise things going well and write it down.
- **Realistically, what is the most likely outcome?**
 Think of your worst and best possible outcomes, can you see any middle ground in between?

COMPLIMENTS

Try to accept compliments, they help to bolster self-esteem. If you find this hard, a simple thank you is often all you need to say. Remember it can be quite hurtful if you reject someone's compliment and they might not bother again. This then creates a missed opportunity for the future to learn what others think of you.

PRACTISE BEING SELF-ASSERTIVE

People who have low self-esteem are often not very assertive but passive. If you are passive you tend to think that your needs and wants are not as important as others. We want you to learn that your needs and wants are equal to those of others. Try to practise being more assertive by following these three steps;

1. Listen to the other person and reflect back what you have heard them say to you. This helps to show that the other person's needs are important to you.
2. State how you think and feel, using "I" statements. This helps you to establish your needs and wants. Try to avoid "You make me feel" statements, as this can sound aggressive.

Try not to use the word "But" between steps 1 and 2.

3. State what you would like the outcome to be. If the other person insists on making demands simply keep repeating step 2 to 3.

What further help is available?

If you are still experiencing problems, due to Low Self-Esteem after working through this booklet you can contact Let's Talk on 0800 073 2200

Let's Talk is Gloucestershire's Improving Access to Psychological Therapy Service (IAPT). We offer CBT with a qualified therapist who will work with you for a number of sessions. CBT focuses on the "here and now" and uses specific techniques to help you to manage your symptoms. CBT encourages you to work on tasks between sessions to help you achieve your goals.

Let's Talk Website:

You can access our website on www.talk2gether.nhs.uk where you will find out more about your difficulties, and also our leaflets and questionnaires that we would like you to complete before you phone us. Alternatively you can speak to your GP who can refer you and also give you a copy of the "Introducing the Let's Talk Service" leaflet, which has our questionnaires on it.

Books on prescription:

Let's Talk can provide you with a book prescription, for a range of self-help books, to take to your local library. The books provide helpful information and step-by-step self-help techniques for managing common conditions, including depression and anxiety.

Overcoming Low Self-Esteem. Written by Melanie Fennel Date

Overcoming Anxiety: Written by Helen Kennerley

Other Self-help Guides in the Let's Talk Service

Let's Talk Panic

Let's Talk Low Self Esteem

Let's Talk Health Anxiety

Let's Talk Social Anxiety

Let's Talk OCD

Let's Talk PTSD

Let's Talk Bereavement and Loss

Let's Talk Managing Negative Thinking

Let's Talk Managing Negative Behaviours

Useful websites

Let's Talk website: www.talk2gether.nhs.uk

Moodometer:

<http://www.2getherinclusion.nhs.uk/themoodometer.php>

Living Life to the Full website: www.lltff.com

MoodGym: <https://moodgym.anu.edu.au/welcome>

Useful Resources

- Living Life To The Full Website <http://www.lltff.com/>
- <http://www.mind.org.uk/>