

Keeping your Mind HEALTHY

A self-help guide to psychological health





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Learning about psychological health

Psychological health is a condition of internal well-being that involves how we feel, think and act. Our psychological health is something we sometimes ignore until it is too late. Really psychological health works in the same way as physical health. Just as you need to take care of your physical health by eating properly, sleeping well and being hygienic, you too need to give regular attention to taking care of your psychological health.

This is particularly important in stressful situations. Everyone throughout their life passes through stressful events such as the death of a family member or losing a job. These events can make us feel sad, tense, worried and vulnerable and if we do not take care of ourselves we might experience problems with our psychological health.

Detention is an example of a very stressful situation; the lack of freedom, shortage of space and uncertainty about the future mean it is a difficult place to live for a long time. Many people have also gone through difficult experiences before arriving in detention. So, it is common for people in detention to experience psychological difficulties.

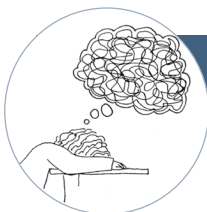


How can this guide **help** me?

This guide will help you recognize the most common psychological difficulties experienced in detention; depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress. It will also help you understand what causes these difficulties.

It is important that you realize that there are things you can do to improve your psychological health. This guide will suggest some ways in which you can cope with stressful situations and feel better. Finally this guide will give you an idea of who to contact if you feel that you need further help.

In this guide we will be speaking about:



Thoughts - What I think, e.g.

“My future is hopeless”

“Tomorrow will be a better day”



Emotions - How I feel, e.g.

“Happy”

“Angry”



Behaviour - How I act, e.g.

“Watch TV”

“Sleep all day”

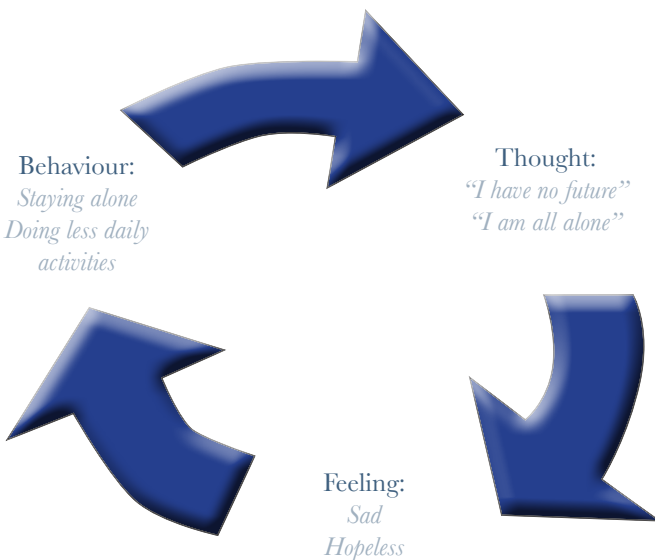
How can I notice if I or a friend are suffering from Depression?



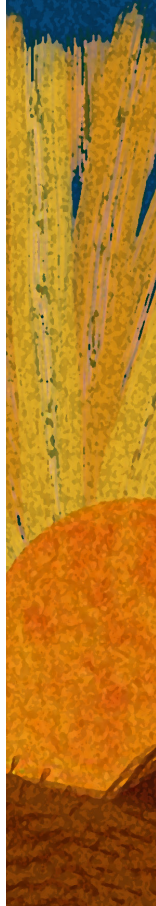
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Sometimes we may start to feel very sad and have little energy or wish to continue with our day. This may happen when we feel unable to cope with very stressful situations, e.g. losing loved ones, having money problems or having relationship difficulties.

In these difficult situations, we get a number of negative thoughts. These thoughts then affect how we feel and act. Here is an example:



This cycle will continue if it is not broken in the ways explained later on.





If you think you or a friend may be depressed ask these questions:

Do you feel like this?

- ☐ Sad, guilty, upset, without hope
- ☐ Crying a lot or not able to cry at all
- ☐ Feeling angry or getting frustrated with very small things
- ☐ Not interested or not able to enjoy things
- ☐ Feeling alone even when you are near people

Do you notice these changes in your body?

- ☐ Sleeping too little or too much
- ☐ Tired, low in energy
- ☐ Unable to sit still
- ☐ Do not feel like eating and your weight changes

Do you think like this?

- ☐ "I am not able to cope"
- ☐ "I am not good at anything"
- ☐ "Other people do not like me"
- ☐ "Everything is hopeless"
- ☐ "I cannot concentrate or remember things anymore"

Do you behave like this?

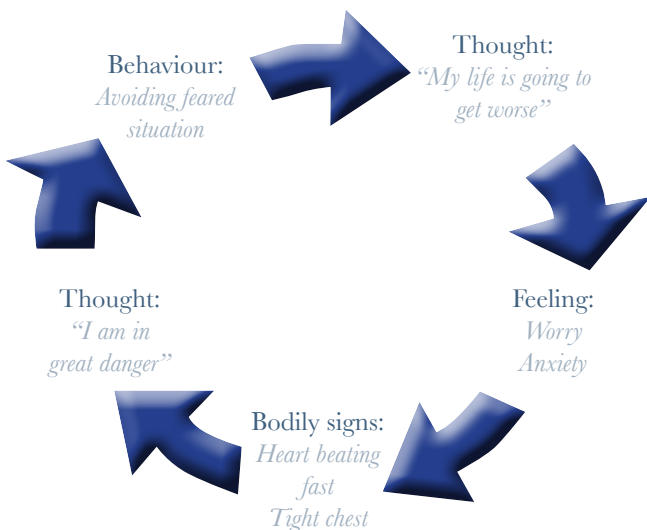
- ☐ Find it difficult to make decisions
- ☐ Getting angry/upset with others
- ☐ Keep saying "I will do the task later"
- ☐ Not doing daily tasks

If you ticked many of these boxes then you may be experiencing low mood or depression.

Anxiety?

Following a difficult event like a rejected asylum claim, a person may start to worry all the time. Normal events like receiving a letter or call start making them very tense, their heart may start beating fast and they may feel unable to breath.

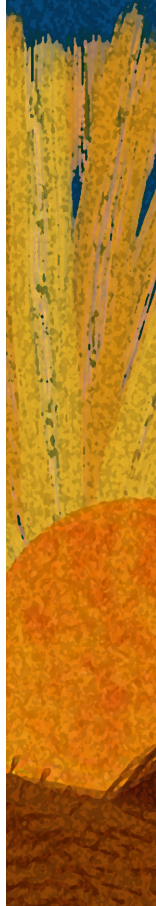
This is because they are experiencing anxiety. This can be scary for the person, but this cycle can help us understand what is happening. Here is an example:




The bodily signs are not serious because they are only a reaction to the anxiety, but they often make a person worry more and the cycle keeps going. This cycle will continue if it is not broken in the ways explained later on.



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If you think you or a friend may have anxiety ask these questions:

Do you feel like this?

- ☐ Worried, nervous, frightened
- ☐ Panicking often and panicking over small things
- ☐ Feeling like something bad is going to happen
- ☐ Feeling tense and stressed

Do you notice these changes in your body?

- ☐ Heart heavy and beating fast
- ☐ Unable to sit still and always moving around
- ☐ Sweating
- ☐ Feeling your chest tight or painful
- ☐ Bad stomach
- ☐ Breathing very fast or having difficulty breathing

Do you think like this?

- ☐ "Very bad things are going to happen to me"
- ☐ Mind jumping from one thing to another, poor concentration
- ☐ Always worrying, many thoughts turning round my head
- ☐ "I cannot control how I feel", "I am going to die"
- ☐ Always thinking that the worst can happen

Do you behave like this?

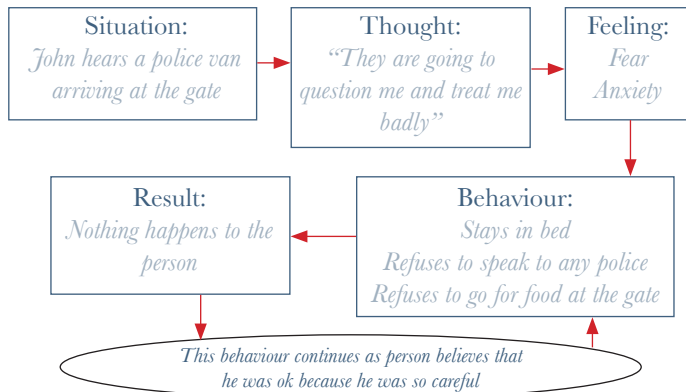
- ☐ Start things and don't finish them
- ☐ Avoid situations that worry you, avoid people
- ☐ Talk fast, become nervous and frustrated with others
- ☐ Smoke or drink alcohol more

If you ticked many of these boxes you may be experiencing anxiety.

Post-traumatic Stress?

Sometimes people pass through a very strong and distressing experience (i.e. a traumatic experience) like torture, war or harsh imprisonment. After these experiences they might start to feel very tense and have repeated thoughts and images of the experience like it was happening again. They will probably be always afraid of anything that reminds them of their distressing experience. Any reminder makes them feel scared or anxious and they begin to stay away from these things.

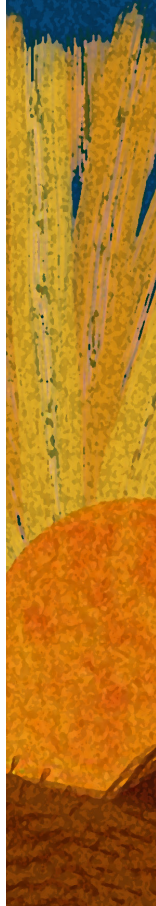
For example, after he was tortured in his home country John started having the following thoughts: “If this happened once, it will happen again”, “I am not safe”. These thoughts made him feel very afraid and anxious. As a result John became very cautious of people/places and was always looking out for danger. Because of his traumatic past John started to feel and act like this:




Later on this guide will explain some ways to change these behaviours.



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If you think you/a friend may have post-trauma stress ask:

Do you feel like this?

- ☐ Worried, nervous, frightened
- ☐ Depressed
- ☐ Feeling like something bad is going to happen
- ☐ Feeling tense and always looking out for danger
- ☐ Feeling strange and detached from the world around you

Do you notice these signs in your body?

- ☐ Heart heavy and beating fast
- ☐ Body feels very tired
- ☐ Getting dizzy, headaches
- ☐ Feeling your chest tight, tense body
- ☐ Feeling pain around my body
- ☐ Crying easily

Do you think like this?

- ☐ Thoughts and pictures of the trauma come into my mind
- ☐ "What happened is my fault"
- ☐ "I am not safe, it will happen again"
- ☐ Always worrying, many thoughts running through my head
- ☐ "I cannot concentrate or make decisions anymore"
- ☐ Get frightened easily even with a small noise

Do you behave like this?

- ☐ Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, nightmares
- ☐ Forget daily things often
- ☐ Can't sit down or relax
- ☐ Avoid things that remind me of the trauma
- ☐ Avoid people OR always need to be near people
- ☐ Get angry or frustrated with people easily, poor relationships
- ☐ Smoke or drink alcohol more

If you ticked many of these boxes then you may be experiencing post-traumatic stress.



How can I HELP MYSELF?

This section speaks about practical ways of how to take care of your psychological health. These suggestions can be useful both for persons that are experiencing depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress and for persons that are feeling fine at the moment, as taking care of psychological health is important for everyone.

If you are experiencing psychological difficulties these steps might appear difficult at first, but they are worth trying out. The more you try these steps out, the greater the possibility that you will start feeling better.



Keeping Active

Keeping active and busy throughout the day is important especially in a place like detention.

Sometimes you might feel like there is nothing much you can do in detention, but with some imagination and effort occupying your day may become easier.

Here is a list of activities tried by other immigrants in detention:

- ✓ Reading
- ✓ Watching TV
- ✓ Listening to music
- ✓ Playing games (e.g. draughts)
- ✓ Praying
- ✓ Drawing
- ✓ Writing (e.g. diary, poem)

When you are feeling sad these activities can be helpful by providing some enjoyment. When you are feeling anxious and worried these activities can provide some needed distraction from your worrying thoughts.



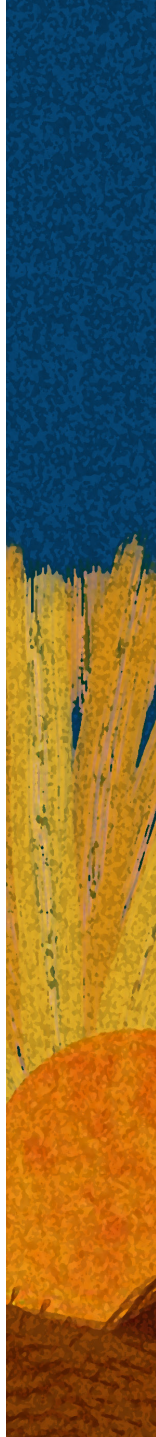
Physical Activity

Daily physical activity can have a big positive effect on how you feel. Exercising can make you feel less tired and in a better mood. If possible, try going for a jog or play a game of football or any other sports outside. If you can't use an outside space, doing push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups etc. can also serve as exercise. To take care of your psychological health try and plan 20 minutes of either outdoor or indoor exercise every day.

Get a Good Amount of Sleep

Sleeping refreshes the mind and the body and is necessary for both our physical and psychological health. Not sleeping enough will make you feel tired, tense and unable to concentrate. Sleeping too much can be harmful also. Sometimes when we are feeling sad or feel that who have nothing to do going to sleep might seem like a good idea. But sleeping too much can make us feel more tired, less energetic and can isolate us from others.

Try to keep a regular sleep routine. Having a regular sleeping time at night will help you sleep quicker and have a more restful night. Try also to minimize your sleeping time during the day. Try to only have one short rest during the day and make a plan of how you can spend the remainder of the day.



Relaxation

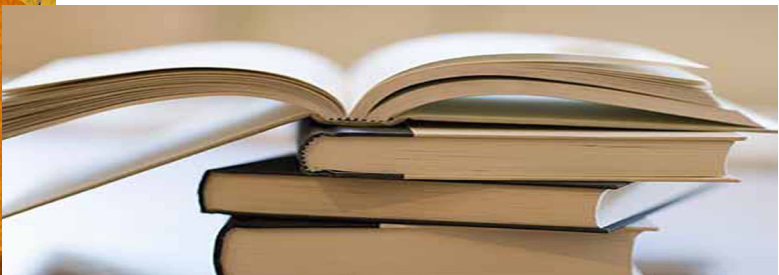
As explained before anxiety causes physical symptoms such as heart racing, fast breathing and sweating. We can control these physical signs of tension by using relaxation strategies. Some persons manage to relax through the activities we mentioned before; exercise, reading, watching TV etc. Apart from these activities you can try exercises for controlling your breathing. The idea behind these exercises is to slow your breathing so that your body can relax. Try practicing the following breathing exercises. Once you learn these exercises you can use them several times a day to calm yourself down.

Holding your Breath

Breathe in deeply through the nose while counting up to 3. Hold your breath while counting up to 3. Then release your breath through your lips, while saying "Relax" to yourself.

Rhythmic Breathing

Breathe in through your nose while counting up to 5. Breathe out through the nose for the same count. Do not hold your breath in between. Continue breathing in this rhythm for a number of minutes.





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Talk to Friends and Family

Communication is necessary for psychological health. When persons are depressed, anxious or suffering from post-traumatic stress they often feel isolated. Not communicating is only going to make that person feel worse.

While it is sometimes useful to spend some time alone to think, reflect and relax you must remember that everyone needs social contact. In detention try to regularly find time to speak to someone about your day, your opinions and any other topic that might interest both of you.

Expressing Your Emotions

Expressing your emotions, both positive and negative, is an important part of being psychologically healthy. In detention people often experience a range of negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety, anger, frustration and hopelessness. Not accepting and not expressing these negative emotions can be dangerous for you. It can make you feel worse and it can make you have an outburst where you might lose your self-control.

It is important to first accept these negative emotions. Remember that every person experiences negative emotions and that detention is a stressful environment for everybody! Once you accept these emotions, there are a number of healthy ways to express them.

The easiest way is through talking to someone you trust about how you are feeling. Sharing your feelings might seem difficult at first, but it can make you feel 'lighter' just like you are now carrying a heavy object

with someone else. Activities like writing, drawing and playing music can also be ways how to express your emotions and feel better.



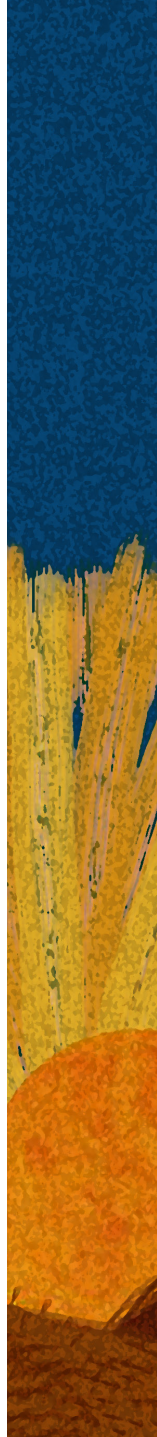
Positive Thinking

As explained before negative thinking sets the depression and anxiety cycles going.

If you are feeling sad every day you are probably having negative thoughts about yourself (e.g. "I am stupid", "No one likes me") and/or negative thoughts about the world and your future (e.g. "My future is hopeless", "The world is a dangerous place"). If you are feeling anxious every day you are probably having negative thoughts related to worry. Examples of such worrying thoughts are "I am not able to make friends" "I will never find a job".

It might be useful to write down these thoughts so that you become more aware of them.

What negative thoughts am I experiencing?



Once you are aware of these thoughts you can do something about them. Sometimes you might make the mistake of being too negative in your thinking and ignoring any positive aspect. When this happens you need to try to balance your thinking. You can do this by asking these questions to yourself:

1. *Am I exaggerating what is negative in me?*
2. *Am I forgetting my strengths as a person?*
3. *Am I only remembering negative events?*
4. *Can I also think of some positive events in my life?*
5. *Am I being too pessimistic about my future?*
6. *Is there something I can be hopeful about?*
7. *Am I worrying too much?*
8. *Is this worrying helping me?*

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Overcoming Avoidance

When people experience anxiety or post-traumatic stress they start avoiding situations and activities they feel are dangerous. The problem is that sometimes these are not dangerous at all. For example, a person suffering from post-traumatic stress might start avoiding the outside yard, eating in a group or speaking to soldiers. These activities are not really dangerous, but the person is afraid of them and by avoiding them this fear becomes stronger and stronger.

If you find yourself avoiding places, situations or activities ask yourself the following questions:

1. *Why am I avoiding this situation or activity?*
2. *Do other people also avoid this situation or activity?*
3. *Is this situation or activity really dangerous?*

Now, if it is possible, try and challenge yourself and try to do the activity or face the situation you are avoiding. You will probably find that you doing this was not as difficult as you first imagined and that you were safe after all. Following this, when facing similar activities or situations in the future your anxiety will not be so strong.





Getting FURTHER HELP

We hope you find this booklet informative and the advice provided useful. The aim of this booklet was to show you how to cope and feel better when you experience psychological difficulties.

In certain cases this booklet might not be enough and professional help is required. So if you feel the problem is too much for you to handle or your psychological difficulties persist, it is very important that you ask for professional help by referring to these contacts. If you notice your friend is suffering from psychological difficulties you can encourage him to speak to these contacts. They will be able to give you relevant advice and/or refer you to sources of professional psychological help.

When living in a detention centre:

- ✓ You can ask the Detention Service staff to arrange to see the doctor visiting detention.
- ✓ Speak to JRS staff during their detention visits or by calling them on 21442751 or 99214445.
- ✓ Speak to other Organisations who visit detention.

When living in the community:

- ✓ If you are living in an open centre, you can speak to one of the centre's staff.
- ✓ Speak to JRS staff by calling on 21442751 or 99214445 or else drop in on a Monday from 9am to 5pm at their office in 50, Triq ix-Xorrox, Birkirkara.
- ✓ Visit the Mental Health Clinic at the Floriana Health Centre at 25, Robert Sammut Square, Floriana or by calling on 21220454.
- ✓ In case you feel your mental health difficulties are urgent contact the Crisis Intervention Team at Mater Dei Hospital, Msida. You can do so by visiting them at the Accident and Emergency Department from Monday to Sunday from 7am till 7pm or phoning them on 2545 3950.





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Sustainable Management of Migration Flows

