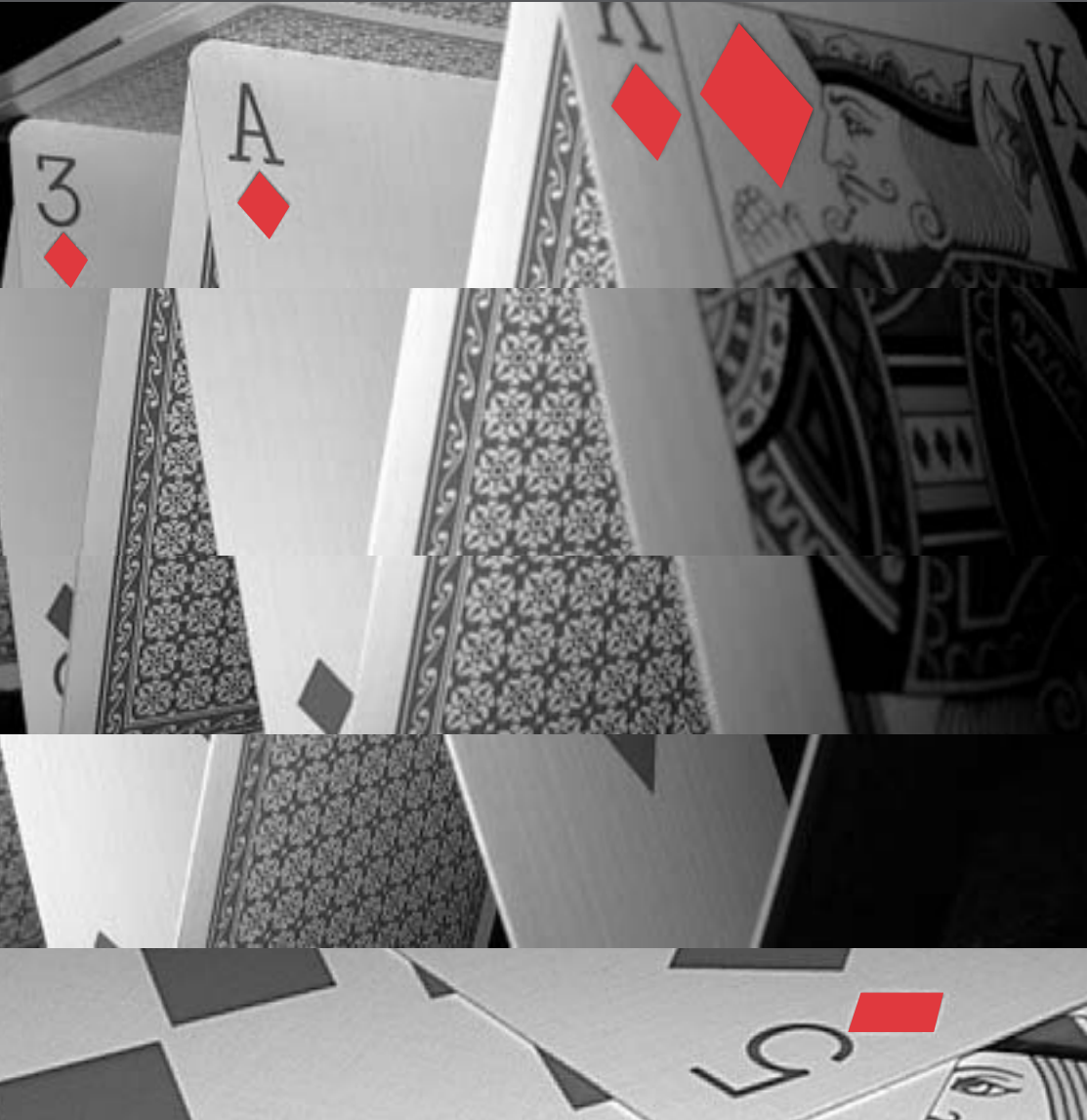


HOW TO ... rebuild your life after breakdown



Mental Health
Promotion Series



HOW TO ... rebuild your life after breakdown



“ Since my experience (I don't like breakdown but can't think of a better word) I have felt an almost obsessive need to set myself goals and challenges. Each challenge successfully completed makes me feel better about myself. Initially, just going off the ward was a challenge, then going shopping, then more shopping (I do endorse retail therapy!) then coping at home, going back to work, then eventually climbing a mountain in Snowdonia, trying scuba diving, swimming a length underwater, studying psychology and so it goes on...my recovery has been a brilliant experience and life has never been better.”

“ I went back to work part time and it was impossible – I simply felt inadequate because I couldn't fit what I wanted/needed to do into the time available ... so I was soon off sick again because I believed I couldn't do my job any more, that I would never be able to cope with it. Eventually, a close friend helped me to see that maybe I wasn't hopeless and that maybe I should make my own decisions about what I could and couldn't do. Then I simply returned to work – full time – without permission – and everything was fine.”

“ The thing which I found vital in my own recovery was finding ways of understanding what I had experienced (and continue to experience on occasions) and accommodating it into my life and view of myself in a way that made sense to me and allowed me not just to survive, but to thrive.”

This booklet is for anyone who has had a breakdown, for their family, friends and for mental health professionals. It offers ideas on self-help, and on how and where to find additional support or information. It draws on the personal experience of people who have successfully rebuilt their lives after breakdown.

I've had a breakdown – will I ever get back to normal?

A breakdown of your mental health can be a shattering experience, but the good news is that most people do recover. Everyone's experience of breaking down is individual. Some people use mental health services during a breakdown, while others cope with their problems alone or within their circle of family or friends. In the same way, each person's needs for recovery after a breakdown are different. There is no correct path to recovery that will suit everyone. However, some of the information and ideas here may be useful to you.



Diagnosis

The term nervous breakdown is generally understood to mean a state in which someone becomes unable to cope with everyday life, perhaps following a particular trauma or, maybe, apparently out of the blue. There are many different forms. If you saw a GP or psychiatrist during your breakdown, you may have been diagnosed as having some form of mental illness. For some people, this can feel reassuring, as it enables them to find out what has been written about that illness and to join organisations or support groups for people with the same diagnosis. Others feel that being given a 'label' makes them less optimistic about their future. Some are told that they will have this problem for life. Don't be put off by negative opinions from others, even if they are professionals. Nobody can predict your future, and most people can recover whatever their diagnosis.

How can I start to regain my confidence?

"At first my goal was to get up and get my son to school, then it was to do a cleaning job, then on to voluntary work, then a part-time job 12 hours a week. Now, I work full time, but it is flexible hours, so I can work from home if I need to and have a day off if I do not feel well."



HOW TO ... rebuild your life after breakdown

There are many different paths you might take, and you need to find what is right for you. While some people find that getting back as quickly as possible to their normal routine is the best way forward, others find this impossible and need to take things very slowly. Some people decide that they want to rethink their lives and take a new direction.

You may find it hard to motivate yourself to do anything at the moment; or you may be pushing yourself too hard to get back to 'normal'. Now is the time to think carefully about how to achieve the right balance between stress and inactivity.

Here are some tips which have been found valuable by people who have recovered from a breakdown.

Be kind to yourself

Recovery is rarely a smooth path. If you have a bad day, try to think what you would wish for someone you care about who felt the way you do, and treat yourself the same way. Don't condemn yourself or feel a failure, just think about what you can learn from what has happened and continue to plan for the future. Watch out for perfectionism, and try to be realistic – set goals that you can achieve.

Do something physical

“I have found gardening brilliant – there's the manual side (working off excess nervousness), the out-in-nature bit, meeting the other gardeners... and, of course, producing some goods.”

“I love fishing... I tend to be a bit go, go, go sometimes, and can't sit still. So having a reason to stay still (i.e. fishing) calms everything down.”

Tension can accumulate if we are inactive. A regular exercise programme can help. Try aerobics, walking, jogging, dancing, swimming, yoga – or an outdoor activity such as gardening or fishing.

Reduce your stress level

- If you tend to put too much pressure on yourself, learn to slow things down. Develop a realistic schedule of daily activities that includes time for work, sleep, relationships, and fun.
- Pace yourself and take mini-breaks. The following simple routine can help. Sit down and get comfortable; slowly, take a deep breath in, hold it, and then exhale very gently. At the same time, let your shoulder muscles droop, smile, and say something positive like, 'I am r-e-l-a-x-e-d.'
- Use a daily 'things to do' list.
- Find a form of regular relaxation that you enjoy, such as taking a quiet stroll, soaking in a hot bath, watching the sun set, or listening to calming music. Create a quiet and restful corner in your house, where you can sit comfortably to read or meditate.
- Be sure to get sufficient rest at night.
- A messy environment can add to stress, so try to keep things tidy, clean and comfortable.
- Healthier living helps. What you eat and drink can have an effect on your mood.

Excessive caffeine and sugar increase nervousness. Over-use of alcohol and tobacco won't help either, though it may not be the best time to try to give up smoking. Try to eat simple, natural foods such as brown rice or other whole grains, fruit and vegetables rather than 'junk' food. (See Mind's booklet, *Mind Guide to Food and Mood*; for details of this and other booklets mentioned here see *Further Reading* on p. 14.)

HOW TO ... rebuild your life after breakdown

“

Find your own coping strategy

“What is most important for me has been learning to understand how stress affects me and also getting to grips with the triggers which cause my relapses.”

”

“The course of each person's life after breakdown is very different. I find the standard health promotion stuff – exercise, diet, relaxation – a little too ‘worthy’ perhaps.”

Many people have found that they can help themselves recover by getting to know more about their problems and creating a personal strategy to overcome them. One helpful technique is to keep a mood diary. This can help you keep track of changes in emotions and try to learn what triggers them and what helps most. It can also help to note down improvements and changes you would like to make.

What works for one person does not necessarily work for another. Try different things, and don't accept others' ideas if they don't suit you.

Creativity helps

Express your feelings in drawing, painting, music or writing. Many people find that it's easier to express feelings in a poem, which can be as structured or free-flowing as you like. It's just for you; you don't have to share it with anyone else. There may be a class you can go to where you can learn a new creative skill.

Finding meaning

An important part of recovering from a breakdown, for many people, is to find some meaning in what has happened. Meditation of some kind can help with this, and reading inspirational books has been of value to many. If you belong to a faith community, this is the time to ask for help and advice from your minister or from other members of your religious community.

Different cultures and religious groups have different understandings of a mental breakdown and you may find help and support within your particular spiritual tradition and community.

Explore complementary therapies

Many have found help for their recovery from a wide range of complementary therapies. Therapies that have been found useful for recovering from a breakdown include aromatherapy, reflexology, massage, spiritual healing, herbal medicine, homeopathy, acupuncture, shiatsu, colour therapy, crystal healing and Bach Flower Remedies. Some of these therapies can be used for your own self-help (see *Further Reading* on p. 14).

How can I rebuild my relationships?

“The social exclusion is the toughest part. Learning to like yourself is the first step towards getting the most from other people and yourself. Everyone is different, but we all need a bit of love and kindness sometimes to get by.”



Relationships may have been under strain during your breakdown. Apologise for any hurts you may have caused others, and try to forgive and let go of any hurts others may have caused you. Then let time do the healing.

Think through whether a problem you are having with another person is really your problem or theirs. If it is yours, deal with it calmly and firmly; if it's theirs, there's not much you can do.

If you have friends or family who understand you, try to enlist their support for your recovery. A regular friendly chat with someone, however brief, can be important healing medicine. You may sometimes find it easier to talk to someone who is not involved with your life and who does not expect support from you in return. A counsellor or therapist can help you see things

HOW TO ... rebuild your life after breakdown

in a different light. Mind have information about how you can find the right talking treatment for you (see *Further Reading* and *Useful Organisations* on pp. 11-15).

You have a right to feel good about yourself, rather than worrying about other people's attitudes to you.

Nobody will be able to help you with all your needs. You need to find out who you can turn to for certain things. Helping others (when you feel able to do this) can take your mind off your own difficulties and remind you that you, too, have something to offer.

Think about what needs to change

If your living or working situation has contributed to your breakdown (e.g. stressful relationships, problems with work, unsuitable housing) consider whether anything needs to change. However, try to put major changes on hold until you have had plenty of time to think and talk it over with someone not involved in your daily life, such as a counsellor.

What sort of help can I get?

Care planning

If you have been a patient of specialist mental health services during your breakdown, you are entitled to be given a care programme. This means that someone from the hospital or social services should talk to you about your health and social needs and work out a plan with you to meet these needs. (However, the health authority is only compelled to offer you aftercare if you have been detained in hospital under certain sections of the Mental Health Act).

Your care plan should be written down and you should have a copy. If a family member or friend is caring for you, they should

also be involved in creating this plan. The plan should specify what help you, and anyone caring for you, can expect from health services and from social services. If you do not have a care plan, or are unhappy with your care plan, contact your local mental health advocacy project, a Citizen's Advice Bureau, or Mind (see also *Useful Organisations* on p.12 and *Further Reading* on p.14).

Medication

If you are on medication following your breakdown, or are offered medication by your doctor, it is your right to ask questions about this. It is a common experience that making your own decisions about medication is better than being pressurised into taking medication that you are unsure about. If your doctor is very insistent that you take medication that you find unpleasant or unhelpful, do seek other advice, from Mind or a mental health advocacy organisation (see *Useful Organisations*).

Find out as much as you can about the medication offered you and the alternatives, including combinations of complementary therapies, talking treatments and support groups.

What about finances and work?

Benefits

It's important that you get good advice on what benefits you, and anyone caring for you, may be entitled to during your period of recovery. You could contact a local Citizen's Advice Bureau, your GP, community health council, social service's department or local library, who should be able to provide information on benefits and employment schemes. See also Mind's booklet, *A-Z of Social Security Benefits for People with a Mental Health Problem*.



HOW TO ... rebuild your life after breakdown

Getting advice or training

For many people, work is important to recovery, whether this means returning to their current job, finding a new job or training course, or finding interesting and worthwhile voluntary work. If you have been a patient of a psychiatric hospital there may be a rehabilitation service where you can get advice and help on how to get into work again. This might include courses on regaining your confidence and social skills, interview techniques, and skills training.

Other potential sources of support and advice about work include: the Community Mental Health Team, Mind or other mental health charities, the Job Centre, or the Citizen's Advice Bureau. There may be a local employment support project which can help you get back into work. You will need advice on how your benefits will be affected by returning to work. The Government's New Deal for Disabled People is an attempt to make returning to work easier for people who have experienced health problems or disability.

Voluntary or part-time work

“What helped me was doing voluntary work for a local user group.” Doing part-time or voluntary work may be a useful way to get started again if you feel you need to take things slowly, or want to change your direction.

Getting back to previous work is important for many people, but may present some problems at first. Flexible working arrangements can be very helpful, but for some this is not possible or desirable. Some people find that getting back to their normal way of life quickly actually helps them recover:

“I found that when I was told in hospital ‘these things take time’ it was the most pessimistic and devastating statement I could have heard. Time was the one thing I did not have as I needed

to get back for my kids. I made a quick recovery (in hospital for one week only) and I think it was mainly because I refused to take any drugs...I love my job and I was aware that all the time I was in hospital I was putting it at risk. I managed to get back to work after a total of seven weeks off and worked one day a week less for 10 weeks. I actually felt much better once I was back to my normal hours."

”

References



A-Z of Social Security Benefits for People with a Mental Health Problem (Mind 2000)

Community Care Factsheets:

1. *The NHS and Community Care* (Mind 2000)
2. *The Care Programme Approach* (Mind 2000)

Employment Factsheet: *Providing information on seeking employment and/or training after experiencing mental distress* (Mind 2000)

Healing Minds (Mental Health Foundation 1999)

Hearing Voices J. Watkins (Hill of Content 1998)

In Good Faith: A resource guide for mental and spiritual well-being (Mental Health Foundation 2000)

Inside Out: A guide to self-management of manic depression (Manic Depression Fellowship 1995)

Recovery – An alien concept R. Coleman (Handsell 1999)

Social Security Factsheets:

1. *Disability Living Allowance* (Mind 1998)
2. *Incapacity Benefit* (Mind 1998)

Strategies for Living – A report of user-led research into people's strategies for living with mental distress (Mental Health Foundation 2000)

Wanting to Work (Depression Alliance 1998)

Working with Voices R. Coleman, M. Smith (Handsell 1997)

HOW TO ... rebuild your life after breakdown



Useful organisations

Citizen's Advice Bureau

(Check phone book for local offices)

Depression Alliance

35 Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7JB

tel. 020 7633 0557

fax: 020 7633 0559

e-mail: information@depressionalliance.org

website: www.depressionalliance.org

Hearing Voices Network

91 Oldham Street, Manchester M4 1LW

tel./fax: 0161 834 5768

e-mail: hearingvoices@care4free.net

website: www.hearing-voices.org.uk

MACA (Mental After Care Association)

25 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3HW

tel: 020 7436 6194

fax: 020 7637 1980

e-mail: maca-bs@maca.org.uk

website: www.maca.org.uk

A national charity providing a wide range of community and hospital-based services for people with mental health care needs and their carers

Manic Depression Fellowship

Castle Works, 21 St George's Road, London SE1 6ES,

tel. 020 7793 2600

fax: 020 7793 2639

e-mail: mdf@mdf.org.uk

website: www.mdf.org.uk



National Schizophrenia Fellowship

30 Tabernacle Street, London EC2 4DD

tel. 020 7330 9100

fax: 020 7330 9102

e-mail: info@nsflondon.org.uk

website: www.nsf.org.uk

**Richmond Fellowship & Richmond Fellowship
Workschemes**

80 Holloway Road, London N7 8JG

tel. 020 7697 3300

fax: 020 7697 3301

e-mail: enquiries@richmondfellowship.org.uk

website: www.richmondfellowship.org.uk

UKAN (UK Advocacy Network)

14-18 West Bar Green, Sheffield S1 2DA

tel. 0114 2728171

fax: 0114 272 7786

e-mail: ukan@can-online.org.uk,

website: www.comcom.org/acorn/ukan.ktm

WorkNet

tel./fax: 020 8215 2444

e-mail: p.seebohm@mind.org.uk

A network of agencies developing mental health employment services

HOW TO ... rebuild your life after breakdown

Further reading

- A-Z of Complementary and Alternative Therapies* (Mind 2000) £3
- A-Z of Social Security Benefits for People with a Mental Health Problem* (Mind 2000) £3
- A-Z of Employment* (Mind 1997) £3
- Claiming Disability Allowance* A. Davis, A. Davis, M. O'Kane (Birmingham University 1997) £5
- The Complete Guide to Mental Health* E. Farrell (Mind/Vermilion 1997) £8.99
- Factsheet: *Employment* (Mind 2000) £1
- Factsheets: *Social Security Benefits* (2) (Mind 1999) 50p each
- Healing Minds* (Mental Health Foundation 1998) £12
- Hearing Voices* J. Watkins (Hill of Content 1998) £10.99
- How to Look After Yourself* (Mind 1999) £1
- How to Cope with Panic Attacks* (Mind 2000) £1
- Inside Out: A guide to self-management of manic depression* (Manic Depression Fellowship 1995) £2
- Making Sense of Treatment and Drugs series* (Mind) £3 each
- Mind Guide to Food and Mood* (Mind 2000) £1
- Rights Guide series 1-7* (Mind) £1 each, £3.50 for all 7
- Recovery – An alien concept* R. Coleman (Handsell 1999) £10
- Strategies for Living – A report of user-led research into people's strategies for living with mental distress* (Mental Health Foundation 2000) £22.50
- Understanding Anxiety* (Mind 2000) £1
- Understanding Depression* (Mind 2000) £1
- Understanding Manic Depression* (Mind 2000) £1
- Understanding Mental Illness* (Mind 2000) £1
- Understanding Obsessive-compulsive Disorder* (Mind 2000) £1
- Understanding Phobias* (Mind 2000) £1
- Understanding Schizophrenia* (Mind 2000) £1
- Understanding Talking Treatments* (Mind 2000) £1
- Working with Voices* R. Coleman, M. Smith (Handsell 1997) £6

For a catalogue of publications from Mind, send a A5 SAE to the address below.

If you would like to order any of the titles listed here, please photocopy or tear out these pages, and indicate in the appropriate boxes the number of each title that you require.

Please add 10% for postage and packing, and enclose a cheque for the whole amount, payable to Mind. Return your completed order form together with your cheque to:

Mind Mail Order
15-19 Broadway
London
E15 4BQ

tel. 020 8221 9666
fax: 020 8534 6399
e-mail: publications@mind.org.uk
(Allow 28 days for delivery).

Please send me the titles marked above. I enclose a cheque (including 10% for p&p) payable to Mind for £

Name
Address
Postcode
tel.

Mind works for a better life for everyone with experience of mental distress

Mind does this by:

- advancing the views, needs and ambitions of people with experience of mental distress
- promoting inclusion through challenging discrimination
- influencing policy through campaigning and education
- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:

autonomy, equality, knowledge, participation and respect

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: 020 8522 1728 (within London) or 0845 7660 163 (outside London) Mon-Fri 9.15am – 4.45pm. For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line. Typetalk is available for people with hearing or speech problems who have access to a minicom. To make a call via Typetalk dial 0800 959598, fax. 0151 709 8119.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 02890 328474



This booklet was written by Jan Wallcraft

ISBN 1-903567-00-9 © Mind 2000

No reproduction without permission

Mind is a registered charity No. 219830

Mind (National Association for Mental Health)

15-19 Broadway, London E15 4BQ

tel. 020 8519 2122, fax. 020 8522 1725

website. www.mind.org.uk