



BEING PREPARED

RECOGNISING THE EARLY SIGNS OF DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, AND STRESS

When people have been depressed many times, the process of becoming depressed can become more and more autonomous. Depression can gather at a very fast pace and seems to escalate without external triggers. This means that it is important to identify in advance, while the mood is stable, those changes (in body and mind) that might signal depression is developing. By recognising the signs earlier, you will be in a better position to deploy the skills you have been practicing.

Additionally, many people find it helpful to recognize the earliest signs that tell them they're getting **burned out, overstressed, or overanxious**. So, even if depression is not your main problem, you may find this section helpful. Your 'remedial' actions will be most effective if you can respond as early as possible to signs that your mood is worsening.

So, the first step in 'Being Prepared' is to identify your 'Early Warning Signs'—the pattern of signs that tell you that your mood is beginning to spiral down in ways that, if left unchecked, will get you stuck, once more, in depression or some other painful emotion. These signs are unique for each individual.

Here are some of the signals of sinking mood that previous participants in MBCT have identified. Some may be true for you; others may not. You might like to check the box of any that seem to reflect your own experience:

- Seeing negative thoughts and feelings taking hold. Finding them more adhesive and difficult to dismiss.
- Becoming irritable with self and others
- Withdrawal from social participation – not wanting to see other people
- Changing sleeping habits
- Changing eating habits
- Getting easily exhausted
- Giving up on exercise
- Not wanting to deal with business (opening mail, paying bills etc)
- Postponing deadlines

What are your own warning signals that depression (or some other unwanted mood state) might be trying to take hold again? Think back over your past experience and, as best you can, recall the patterns that might have given you early warning that your mood was slipping.

Use the questions on the following pages as a guide. The aim is, carefully and with curiosity, to investigate the thoughts, feelings, body sensations, and patterns of behaviour that tell you that your mood state is starting to change and drop. If it feels comfortable, include those with whom you share your life in a collaborative effort to notice and then to respond rather than to react to these signs.

What triggers depression/low mood/anxiety/stress for you?

- Triggers can be external (things that happen to you) or internal (e.g., thoughts, feelings, memories, concerns).
- Look out for small triggers as well as large ones—sometimes something that appears quite trivial can spark a downward mood spiral.

What sort of thoughts run through your mind when you first feel your mood drop?

What emotions arise?

What happens in your body?

What do you do, or feel like doing?

Are there any old habits of thinking or behaviour that might unwittingly keep you stuck in depression (e.g., ruminating, trying to suppress or turn away from painful thoughts and feelings, struggling with it instead of accepting and exploring it)

In addition, you may wish to consider:

What, in the past, has prevented you from noticing and attending to warning signs and signals? (e.g., pushing away, denial, distraction, a sense of hopelessness, using alcohol, arguments, blaming family members or colleagues)

How might you include friends and family members in your early warning system?

Finally, you might wish to **summarise this exercise** by writing down the **five key signs** that tell you that your mood is starting to dip, or that depression may be taking hold:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.