

Appendix XVI

Handout: Dealing with Setbacks during the Recovery Process

When you are recovering from a mental health problem, it is normal to experience ups and downs and, for most people, recovery is not a smooth process. Setbacks can be frightening, especially if you have been feeling much better and beginning to think you can achieve recovery. Prior to starting to recover, when you are in the depths of experiencing mental health problems, one bad day feels much like the next and 'having a bad day' is not that noticeable. However, when you start to recover, you may begin to experience positive feelings again and realise that recovery is possible. It can therefore come as a surprise and a shock when you have a bad day. Bad days can happen for all kinds of different reasons: maybe something specific has happened to trigger it off or maybe you just woke up feeling a bit blue/anxious. Negative thoughts can creep in: 'I'm never going to get better', 'There's no point in even trying to get better'. These negative thoughts can lead you to feel worse.

Setbacks are a completely normal part of recovery. It can be very important to experience at least one setback during the recovery process as it can act as a learning process and teach you that you can climb back out of the setback mode. You can also learn techniques to help you out of the setback and keep a note of these for future use. Once you have experienced recovery from a setback, you will begin to realise that they are not as frightening as you initially thought and you will generally feel more confident that you will be able to make a recovery.

Guidelines for recovering from setbacks

1 Remembering that setbacks are normal

Once you are actually in the midst of a setback, it can be difficult to remember what might be happening and panic can set in. It can therefore be very helpful to name the process and tell yourself that you are having a setback and that it is a normal stage of recovery. It may also be useful to remind yourself that 'bad days' can feel much worse once you have experienced some 'good/reasonable' days because of the contrast between the two states.

2 Negative thoughts

Once you start to notice you are having a bad day, it can very quickly trigger all kinds of negative thoughts: 'I'm never going to get any better' is probably one of the most common thoughts and it can lead to feelings of hopelessness. You then start to feel worse and have more negative thoughts. These are the kinds of thoughts that could be challenged using a thought diary: think about the sort of advice you might give to a friend who is experiencing a setback.

3 Avoidance

When you have a bad day, you might start to avoid your normal activities. This can make you feel worse, as you will have more time to think about negative things and have less to distract you from your bad day. You may also feel guilty about avoiding things. Try to keep activities going as much as possible. Plan some pleasant activities that usually help to

lift your mood. Make sure you plan some relaxation time. Treat yourself gently and do not blame yourself for the setback. Eat nice healthy foods and get as much sleep as possible.

4 Moving back to first principles

It is easy to feel helpless during a setback and many people can be left wondering how to help themselves out of the hole they feel they have fallen into. It can be helpful to remind yourself of the changes you have made and to reflect on your successes. Do not feel ashamed to go back to the techniques you found helpful at the beginning of your recovery – this does not mean you have failed. Read old handouts you may have been given if you have been in therapy, or old books you used to find helpful.

5 Flashcards and letters

It is hard to remember helpful tips or, indeed, that you have made improvements when you are in the midst of a setback. For this reason, it can be helpful to plan for a setback and make 'flashcards' that can be produced during a setback. These can be pieces of card with short statements written on them, such as:

- 'I am having a setback which is why I am feeling like this.'
- 'Setbacks are a normal part of recovery.'
- 'I will feel better again – I have recovered before.'
- 'Remember to eat healthy food on a regular basis.'
- 'Try to get sleep as regularly as possible.'
- 'Remember to use thought-challenging sheets.'

Some people write a letter to themselves to read on bad days. This is sometimes known as a 'rainy day letter'. It may read as follows:

Dear Megan,

You are having a bad day today which is why you have chosen to read over this letter. I am writing this letter on a good day to remind you of all the changes you have made. You have made many changes and gained confidence as a mother as well as cutting down on so many of the checks and most of the questions you used to ask. Writing this letter today, I feel so much better and feel I am getting my life back. I know you may be having a bad day today but it won't last...

It is important to write the flashcards and the rainy day letter when you are feeling in a positive mood – it is just too hard to do these tasks when you are feeling low.

6 Specific strategies for dealing with setbacks in depression

- Get active. Start with small goals and keep the goals regular but achievable.
- Be mindful of small pleasures.
- Notice any achievements, no matter how small.
- Try not to compare what you are currently able to do with what you were doing before the setback occurred – this is *such* an important point.
- Try not to criticise yourself. Tackle critical thoughts with thought-challenging techniques.
- Try not to avoid friends, especially those with whom you find it helpful to be in contact.

7 Specific strategies for dealing with setbacks in anxiety

- Remind yourself of coping strategies that help you to feel calmer and more relaxed.
- Go back to practising breathing and relaxation techniques.
- Remind yourself of how to use grounding techniques and practise these.

- Return to easier goals on the hierarchy and practise these regularly until you feel ready to move on to the next step.
- Tackle anxious thoughts with thought-challenging techniques.

8 Specific strategies for dealing with setbacks in OCD

- Re-read the handouts and remind yourself how the OCD cycle is maintained.
- Move back to working on goals you previously found easier.
- Remember how 'thought–action–meaning' fusion works.
- Challenge unhelpful appraisals of intrusive thoughts.