



skinsupport
changing how you feel about your skin



Staying active and improving your mood with a skin condition

A self-help leaflet created for the British Association of Dermatologists' SkinSupport website, 2014

The aims of this leaflet:

Before we get into explaining how our skin can affect our lives it's important for us to understand the aims of this leaflet. We are looking to break the cycle of reduced activity that can be brought on by a skin condition, breaking this cycle and becoming more active can help improve our moods. This activity might not necessarily be physical but may simply be something important to us as individuals, for example socialising with friends. Put simply this leaflet will help you to:

1. Increase activity you feel is meaningful and can lift your mood.
2. Look at the challenges of increasing meaningful activity.

This leaflet will help you to develop a plan to increase activity and improve your mood.

The link between your skin and activity levels:

The skin is the largest organ of the body, and so it's no surprise that having a skin condition can have a big impact on everyday life. There are a number of factors which you may have to consider when living with a skin condition including the visibility of the condition, taking time to apply topical treatments, scheduling hospital appointments and itching or pain triggered by the condition to name just a few. This can be a lot to think about; when we are already busy and have other things going on

"Hospital appointments take a massive chunk out of your day and because I have to do it regularly I have to go 2 days before to have my bloods taken and then I have to go to the GP on a daily basis, well maybe not daily but on a weekly basis"

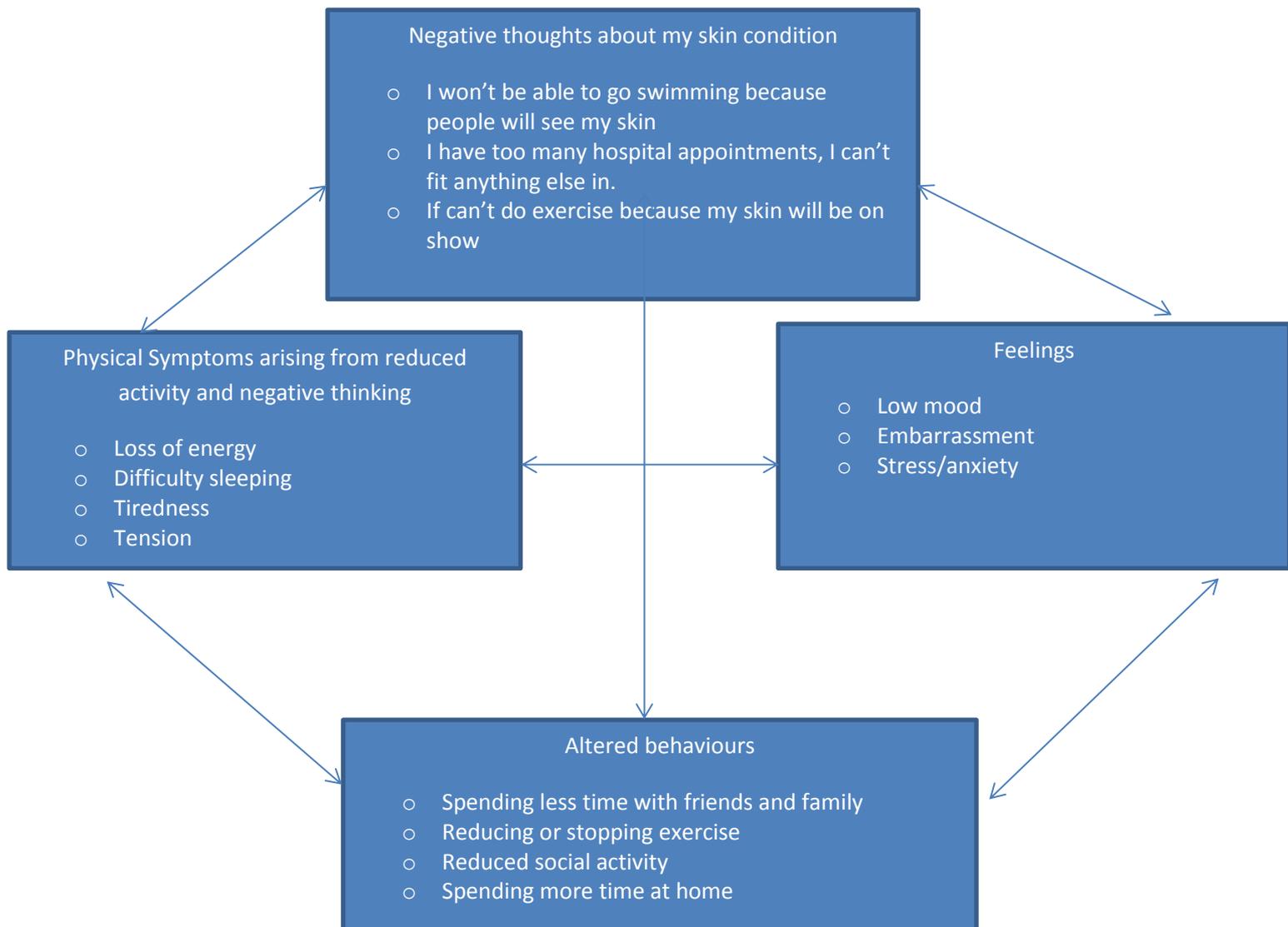
"I don't work very many mornings if I don't have to because my face is always so swollen and I've changed everything in my house to limit this as much as I can, I wash my bedding twice as often as anyone else would and I've got all the dust protectors I've spent hundreds of pounds on all this stuff"

25 year old female living with Urticaria

in our lives it can seem overwhelming. We may start to experience some of the symptoms below

- A loss of energy
- A loss of motivation
- Difficulty sleeping
- A loss of appetite
- A loss of interest in doing things I used to enjoy doing
- Finding everyday tasks more difficult
- Difficulty making decisions
- Feeling physically unwell – for example feeling tired, or getting headaches

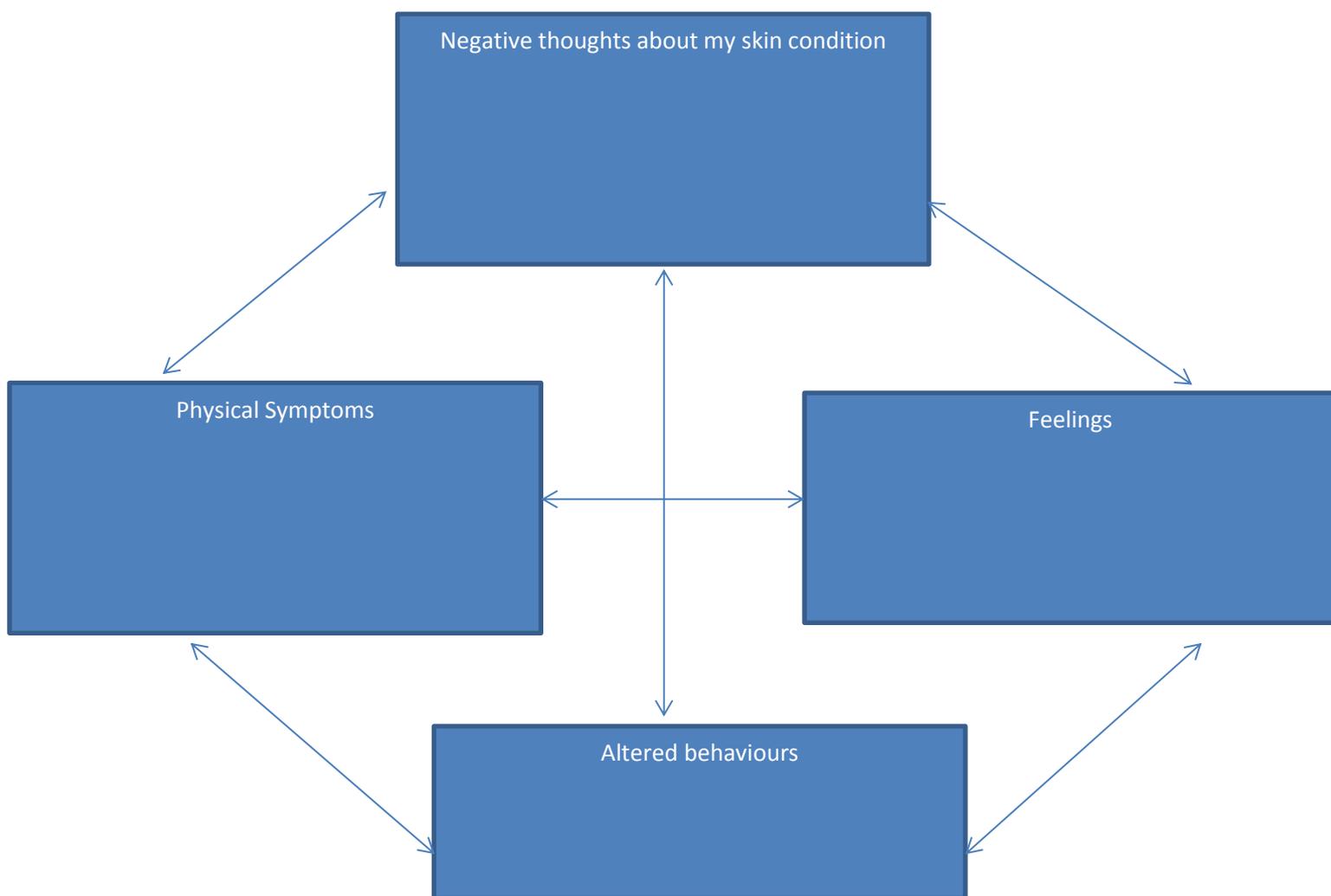
It's understandable that if we are experiencing these symptoms we might stop doing things that we enjoy and isolate ourselves from other people. This can cause us to get stuck in a vicious cycle. The graphic below demonstrates how a particular situation or circumstance, such as being diagnosed with a skin condition, can have an impact on our life, causing negative feelings and resulting in behaviours that might negatively affect other important parts of our lives.



Life events can make us feel that our life will be less rewarding, we may experience negative thoughts about ourselves and our capabilities which can lead to feelings of worthlessness and low mood which affect our behaviours. We might stop going out and seeing friends, or we might stop exercising. This change in activity has consequences for our mood. We could lose friendships and have deteriorating physical health due to lack of exercise. These consequences confirm how we think and feel and we get stuck in a vicious cycle.

It might be helpful to fill in the cycle below yourself to see how your symptoms may be keeping you in a cycle of reduced activity. To do this you might wish to pick one activity that you have not been doing as much or have stopped doing (for example seeing friends). Think about what worries you might have when you think about this activity and how this affects your mood.

The activity I have stopped/ reduced is.....



So far we have looked at reduced activity and how our thoughts, feelings and how we feel physically can affect what we do, now it is time to look at increasing activity we feel is meaningful and

important to us. Increasing meaningful activity has been found to be effective in improving symptoms of low mood in people experiencing depression.

Part 1: Meaningful activity and rediscovering value in life:

Consider the following case study of Mary.

Mary is 25 years old and has been diagnosed with psoriatic arthritis. She works full time as an administration manager and enjoys a very active social life, going out with friends and is a member of a local running club. Mary would usually run around 30 miles a week and she finds exercise very helpful to lift her mood and manage stress. She describes herself as a sociable, active person who is happiest when surrounded by friends and family. Over the last 12 months Mary has noticed her physical health symptoms worsening, she has noted increased pain in her joints, particularly after long days at work and after running, and that her psoriasis is more visible.

Due to looming deadlines Mary has pushed herself to work long days for a couple of weeks, until eventually she started to become physically unwell and had to take time off sick. Mary is worried about going back to work due to the mounting work load and also has concerns about how her pain will be affected by being sat down for long periods. Mary has stopped running because she wasn't able to keep up with her running club doing 8-9 miles per session. She has also stopped seeing friends because she feels tired and doesn't feel like they want to listen to her moaning. Mary has been spending more time in the house alone, thinking about what she will do if her psoriasis doesn't improve and worrying what the future holds.

Using the case of Mary, consider the questions below

- a) What has Mary stopped doing?
- b) What impact do you think her reduced activity could be having on her mood?
- c) If you were Mary's friend what advice would you give her?

Mary is no longer living her life in line with what's important to her; she has stopped exercise and seeing friends. For Mary running is something that formed part of her routine and social life so on a scale of 0 (not important at all)- 10 (very important) Mary would probably have rated exercise as 9.

Living my life in line with what is important to me:

Everyone is different and has different values. Unlike Mary some people do not feel exercise is important, but might find fulfilment in other areas. Take some time to think about what is important to you and rate on a scale of 0-10 how important these values are to you personally (0=not important at all, 10= very important). If you can think of others add them on to the list.

Activity	Importance to you	Time spent on activity
Family		
Friends		
Socialising		
Exercising		
Work		

Education		
Hobbies & Interests		
Engaging with the Local Community		

Now that you have rated how important these things are to you have a look at the third column. Have a think about how much time you have spent time on each one during the last 2 weeks on a scale of 0 (no time at all)-10 (all my time).

Now compare the two, how much time are you spending living in line with your values? Here is an example of two of Mary’s values:

Activity	Importance to Mary	Time spent on activity
Exercising	9	0
Friends	10	0

We can see for Mary there is an inconsistency between what she feels is important and what she is doing. Having these inconsistencies can lead you to feeling down because you aren’t living in line with what’s important to you. However, the good news is that identifying what’s important to you can help in beginning to motivate yourself towards rebuilding valued activity back into your life. We need to recognise what is important, and to step back from beating ourselves up that we aren’t able to do everything like we used too, or like we’d hoped too. Let’s start with thinking about what you could do.

Thinking about the lists you have made it would now be helpful to write down the activities that you could be doing that are in line with your values.

For example for Mary seeing friends is important to her so one activity she might write down would be ringing a friend to chat or meeting a friend for a coffee.

My list of meaningful activities:

(Be sure to cover each area that you scored as important to you)

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.....

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So far you have considered what is important to you and how long you have spent on meaningful activity over the last two weeks. You have also made a list of meaningful activities, the next step is to consider adding these activities into your routine. It might be helpful to use a diary sheet.

Activity Diary:

Take some time to think about what you are doing over the course of a week. Once you have added in all your routine activities (for example work and housework) think about where you might add some of your meaningful activities. It's important not to feel overwhelmed, this exercise is not about asking you to go out and do all of these activities tomorrow. Having activities scheduled in can help us to stick to them and make them a priority. You might want to stick your diary to the fridge so you can see it each day

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Morning							
Afternoon							
Evening							

Part 2: Challenges to increasing meaningful activity:

Having a skin condition can lead to changes in your lifestyle. You might have noticed you are not able to do everyday activities as easily. This may be due to the physical symptoms of your condition, or it may be due to anxieties about the condition being visible to others. It may be helpful to think about some of the challenges living with a skin condition may bring up when you think about doing meaningful activity and listing them below.

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.....
.....

Taking care of our physical health

One challenge is that skin conditions can be unpredictable; we might have some days that are better than others. On good days we might be tempted to complete all our tasks. What happens here is that we “overdo it” and this can leave us feeling tired and physically unwell on the following days. Alternatively we may feel tired and reduce activity, and this then leads us to doing less, leading us to lose fitness and tire more easily when doing everyday tasks.

Let’s think again about Mary:

Mary was no longer able to run her usual 30 miles so she stopped running and exercising altogether, despite it being something she valued. She had the expectation that she could keep up with her running club and run 30 miles and she didn’t adjust this expectation when she started experiencing physical health problems. At different stages in our lives we are met with changes in physical abilities, this could be the result of age, injury or physical health problems. When this happens we have to adjust our expectations, as we can no longer do the things that we could easily do before. This is not a straightforward adjustment as we are so used to performing at a certain level. Consider a marathoner runner who is feeling unwell on the day of a race they may have to mentally adjust their expectations of finishing times, with the goal moving from running a three hour marathon to simply getting round the course. They may say to themselves: My goal to run a three hour marathon is for when conditions are good, unfortunately I am unwell and therefore my expectations of what I can do need to change.

For Mary it might be to consider reducing time spent running and see if this is helpful, or it might be trying different forms of exercise that have less impact on her joints such as swimming. By doing this Mary has adapted her routine but is still able to do meaningful, valued activity.

When you are thinking about goals it might be helpful to consider the following points

- Set yourself realistic goals that are appropriate to your current situation
- Plan breaks and remember to stop.
- Acknowledge what you have done rather than focusing on what you have yet to do.
- Consider your values and ask what’s important- how long something takes or the end result?

If this example sounds familiar to you, you might want to consider pacing. Here are some ideas which may help you to carry out meaningful activity whilst keeping your energy levels stable.

Schedule regular breaks:

Don’t wait until you feel really tired; decide how often you will take breaks by listening to your body. This might mean taking a five minute break every 15 minutes or a 15 minute break every 30 minutes.

You might prefer to schedule breaks after specific tasks, for example I will do the washing-up and then take a break before starting on cleaning the windows OR I will complete this report and then take a break before starting the next.

Don't miss breaks:

Even if you aren't tired don't be tempted to skip the breaks. These breaks are about making sure you don't become tired.

A break means stop:

Taking a break means coming away from the task you are doing, taking a sit down or making a drink and then going back to it.

Breaks are not scheduled just for physical activity:

Doing paper work sitting at a desk can be physically uncomfortable for many people, so use breaks here as well. If you find sitting for long periods uncomfortable make sure you regularly change position or move around the office.

Physical health can affect concentration so be considerate of yourself:

Taking a comfort break at work can help you recharge and go back to your work with a clear head. You can take breaks without being obvious by taking a bathroom break or making a drink - but when you are doing these things take a moment to take your thoughts away from the task and think about something else.

Taking care of our mental health and wellbeing

Increasing meaningful activity might seem challenging if you feel anxious about your skin condition. Being diagnosed with a skin condition can create big changes in your lifestyle and like all change you will need some time to adjust.

This section aims to offer advice on strategies to manage anxiety about increasing meaningful activity so you might feel more confident to make changes.

- **It's important to start somewhere**

You might have identified some activities you would like to start doing again, or do more frequently and that's great. However, it's important to recognise that there has been a period of time where you haven't done these activities therefore you might feel anxious about doing them again or starting afresh. This anxiety is perfectly normal, but it's important to start off with something manageable and build up. For example if you have stopped swimming it would be unrealistic to expect yourself to go swimming 7 days a week. You might want to think about going once a week, at a time that is not as busy so you can gradually become more familiar with the environment. This will allow you to build confidence.

- **If at first we don't succeed.....**

We might make a plan to do something but when the time comes around we feel we cannot manage it. That's ok, take a step back and think about what you had asked yourself to do. If you felt uncomfortable it might be because you need to start off with something that does not provoke as much anxiety. For example if you have decided to socialise more with friends you might choose to go for a meal before committing yourself to a night out.

○ **Think about your successes**

It is important to recognize your progress. If you have started to increase your activity you may be having negative thoughts that you are not doing as much as you used to. Think about comparing what you have done over the last week to before you started to increase activity and see the differences, socializing once in a week may be more than you have done in the last month so this is progress. If you are noticing these types of thoughts think about what you would say to a friend about their progress.

Managing physical symptoms of anxiety

Here is an example of a three minute mindfulness breathing exercise that can be helpful if you notice you are experiencing physical symptoms of anxiety.

Step 1: Becoming aware

Deliberately adopt an erect and dignified posture, whether sitting or standing. If possible, close your eyes. Then, bring your awareness to your inner experience and acknowledge it, asking: what is my experience right now?

- What *thoughts* are going through the mind? As best you can, acknowledge thoughts as mental events.
- What *feelings* are here? Turn towards any sense of discomfort or unpleasant feelings, acknowledging them without trying to make them different from how you find them.
- What *body sensations* are here right now? Perhaps quickly scan the body to pick up any sensations of tightness or bracing, acknowledging the sensations, but, once again, not trying to change them in any way.

Step 2: Gathering and focusing attention

Now, redirecting the attention to a narrow 'spotlight' on the physical sensations of the breath, move in close to the physical sensations of the breath in the abdomen . . . expanding as the breath comes in . . . and falling back as the breath goes out. Follow the breath all the way in and all the way out. Use each breath as an opportunity to anchor yourself into the present. And if the mind wanders, gently escort the attention back to the breath.

Step 3: Expanding attention

Now, expand the field of awareness around the breathing so that it includes a sense of the body as a whole, your posture and facial expression, as if the whole body was breathing.

If you become aware of any sensations of discomfort, tension, feel free to bring your focus of attention right in to the intensity by imagining that the breath could move into and around the sensations. In this, you are helping to explore the sensations, befriending them, rather than trying to change them in any way. If they stop pulling for your attention, return to sitting, aware of the whole body, moment by moment.

Danny Penman and Mark Williams (2011) Finding peace in a frantic world (www.franticworld.com)

Summary:

Meaningful activity is important, it can improve our mood and as we know physical health and mental health are closely linked. Living with a skin condition can create barriers to meaningful activity, hopefully you will have learned strategies which can be helpful to overcome some of these challenges.

Authors:

Kerry Montgomery; Dr Andrew Thompson, University of Sheffield. 2014

If you feel you would benefit from speaking to someone about any of the difficulties you have been experiencing please contact your doctor to arrange an appointment.

Further reading

Health and wellbeing

<http://www.nhw.nhs.uk/pic/selfhelp/>

Self-help leaflets on common mental health problems

www.mind.org.uk

Information on common mental health problems and how to access support

www.nhs.uk

Find more information on health conditions from the NHS

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/depression/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

Information on depression and treatments available

www.samaritans.org.uk

Telephone: 08457 90 90 90 (24 hours a day)

Provides confidential emotional support to people experiencing distress, including but not limited to thoughts of suicide. You can contact the Samaritans by email or phone 24 hours a day. More information is available on the website

<http://www.time-to-change.org.uk/>

www.childline.org.uk

Telephone: 0800 1111

Information and advice for young people up to age 19.

<http://www.paintoolkit.org/>

This website has information and advice for people living with long term health conditions and chronic pain.

<http://franticworld.com/>

A website related to the book *Finding peace in a frantic world* by Danny Penman and Mark Williams (2011). The website features downloadable resources and information on mindfulness

www.headspace.com

Short meditations providing information on mindfulness and how to integrate it into your everyday life

www.getselfhelp.co.uk

Information on common mental health problems and self-help resources