

Overcoming low mood guide

Introduction

Welcome to this Foothold and Rightsteps guide on how to manage low mood and improve your mental health.

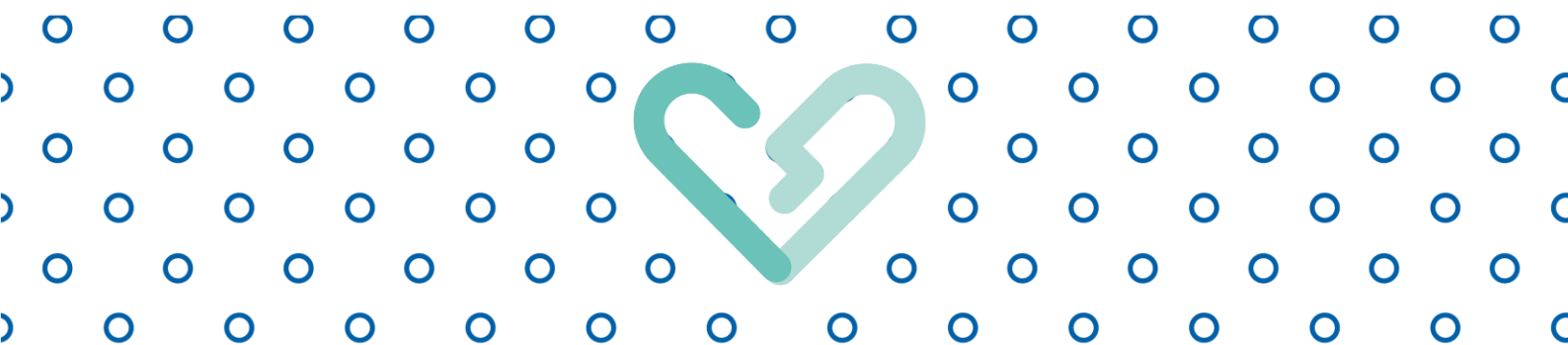
If you are interested in knowing more about low mood, this guide will help you consider:

- **What is low mood**
- **What seems to cause and maintain it**
- **What treatment options are available and how to access these**
- **Some useful ideas for managing low mood more effectively**

There are also some links to further resources that can be used to access more information about low mood.

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What do we mean by low mood?

Low mood difficulties are common. They can affect any person at any time in their life.

When feeling low, people may find themselves losing interest in things they previously enjoyed. They may find it difficult to tell others how they feel and they may struggle to concentrate. Everyday problems, such as money, work or relationship issues may feel a lot harder to deal with and they could feel less able to cope.

People may experience low mood once, or this may return again over time.

Low mood usually improves after a few days or weeks. If you, or someone you know, experience negative feelings that don't go away or get worse, you may want to seek further advice by talking to your GP or call NHS 111. They can discuss things further with you and suggest what to do next.



Why do people feel low?

People may feel low for a number of reasons, alone or in combination. For example:

Genetics and biology

Low mood can run in families: certain genes we inherit can leave us more vulnerable to developing it. Lower levels of certain brain chemicals (e.g. serotonin) have also been associated with low mood.

However, we don't know if these changes cause low mood, or low mood causes these changes instead.

Physiology and hormones

Over or under-production of certain hormones in the brain are also linked to mood difficulties.

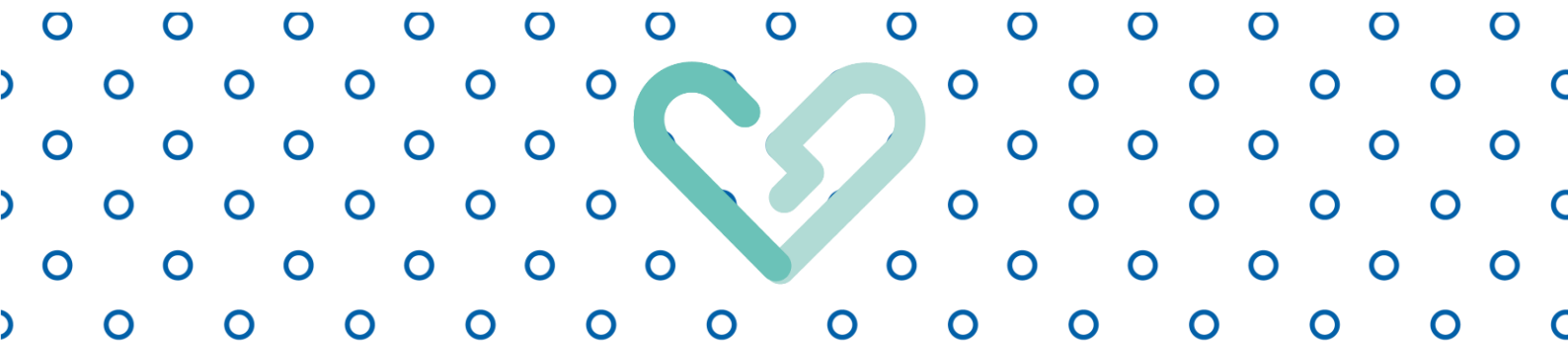
But again, we don't know whether these are the result of low mood or its cause.

Negative early experiences

Experiences such as bullying, physical or emotional abuse and/or neglect can often leave people thinking negatively about themselves and others around them.

Perfectionism and a sense of failure

People may often stake their happiness on achieving extremely high goals, e.g. getting a particular job. If they don't achieve these high goals, they believe they have failed.



Stressful life events

Life events such as being out of work, illnesses and accidents, ending a relationship or the death of a loved one can leave us feeling low.

Sometimes there might not be a single event that triggers low mood; instead, ongoing stressors (problems that seem to go on and on, with no solution in sight) can eventually lead to mood difficulties.

Poor physical health

Acute or chronic physical health problems e.g. cancer, diabetes, chronic pain etc. can be difficult to manage and can leave us feeling low.

Medication side effects

Patients are advised to check their patient information leaflets before they start a new medication as low mood can often be a side effect. If this is the case, they can discuss their symptoms with their GP, who could prescribe an alternative medication, if needed.

Drugs and alcohol misuse

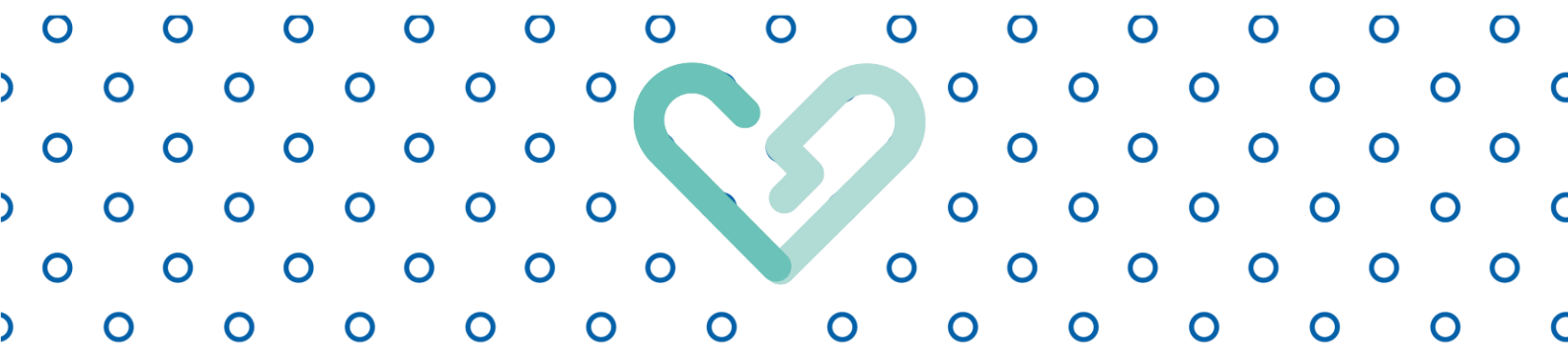
Alcohol and street drugs can also contribute to low mood.

Although people might initially use drugs and/or alcohol to make themselves feel better, they can make them feel worse in the longer term.

Poor sleep, diet or physical exercise

A poor diet, reduced physical activity and impaired sleep can affect our mood, and make it harder to cope with everyday difficulties.

Although they cannot directly cause low mood, they can leave people more vulnerable to developing it.



What are the signs of low mood?

Low mood has a wide range of symptoms. They include thoughts, feelings, changes to our body and the way we behave. For instance, people may:

Feel...

- Sad, upset or tearful
- Frustration or anger
- Agitated, restless or irritable
- Worthless or guilty
- Empty or numb
- Anxious or panicky
- Low in confidence or low self-esteem
- Headaches
- Tired
- Tense muscles, aches and pains in the body
- Lower sex drive



Think...

- “I can’t cope”
- “I have no confidence”
- “Everything is hopeless”
- “The worst is going to happen”
- “I can’t be bothered”
- “Nothing will ever get better”
- “It’s all my fault, I can never do anything right”



Behave...

- Stop doing the things they used to enjoy
- Stop doing everyday tasks
- Stop caring for their appearance
- Avoiding friends and family
- Eat and/or sleep more (or less)
- Drink alcohol and/or smoke more
- Take drugs



Although it is common for people to experience many of these symptoms, there are also many things they can do to improve their mood. Next, we will discuss which treatments could help with this.



Which treatments can help?

For some people, low mood goes away on its own, without any treatment. For others, getting help can be important.

For those requiring treatment, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines recommend antidepressant medication and/or various psychological therapies, depending on how severe their symptoms are.

Medication

Some people may be offered antidepressant medication, either on its own or in combination with a psychological treatment. This can help them to improve their mood as well as other related symptoms (e.g. their appetite or concentration). They may also feel more able to deal with problems more effectively.

Here you can read more information about different types of antidepressant medication and how they work: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/antidepressants/>

Psychological Treatments

There are many different psychological treatments available for low mood.

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is recommended by NICE as a first choice psychological treatment for low mood. CBT helps people to make changes to how they think and behave in order to feel better. CBT can be offered via face-to-face, over the phone or online (i-CBT) sessions, depending on symptom severity and personal preference.

Here is a link with more information about CBT and other psychological therapies: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/types-of-therapy/>



What can get in the way?

There are a number of things that can prevent people from seeking help. Two of the main things are low self-confidence and feeling alone:

Low self-confidence

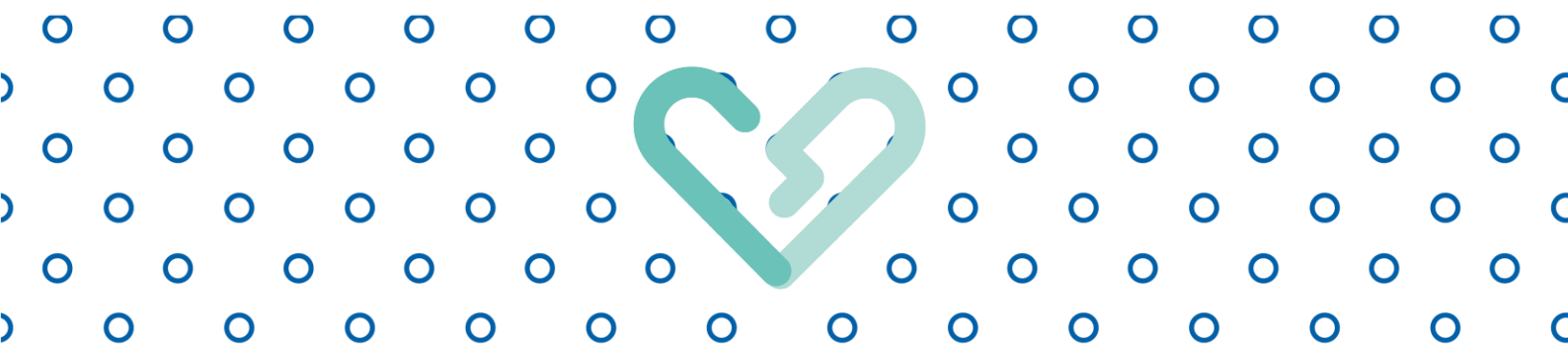
Low mood can often make people feel less able to cope with their difficulties and leave decisions to others, instead.

Self-confidence can enable people to take action in order to improve their mood. Moreover, making a decision -any decision- can help people to feel better about themselves and their ability to cope.



What can I do?

There are a number of things that can boost our self-confidence.



1. Split bigger problems into smaller chunks

This can make our problems feel less intimidating. Here is how we can do this:

- Figure out step-by-step what we need to do to deal with our problem.
- List our steps in order of difficulty. We can start with the easiest one and work our way up.
- Create a timeline for each step as this can help us focus better.
- Have a plan to help us stay on track, e.g. put enough time aside for each step, so that we don't rush and fail.

2. Share how you feel with people around you

Often, problems feel bigger and scarier when we are facing them on our own.

Talking through a problem with someone else can help us to put things into perspective, consider other views and decide what to do next.

People who care about us can also be a great source of support whilst we are trying to improve our mood. Opening up to others can also help us to build closer relationships and feel we are being “heard” and valued.

3. Be kinder to yourself

When we feel low, we tend to beat ourselves up over things that aren't our fault.

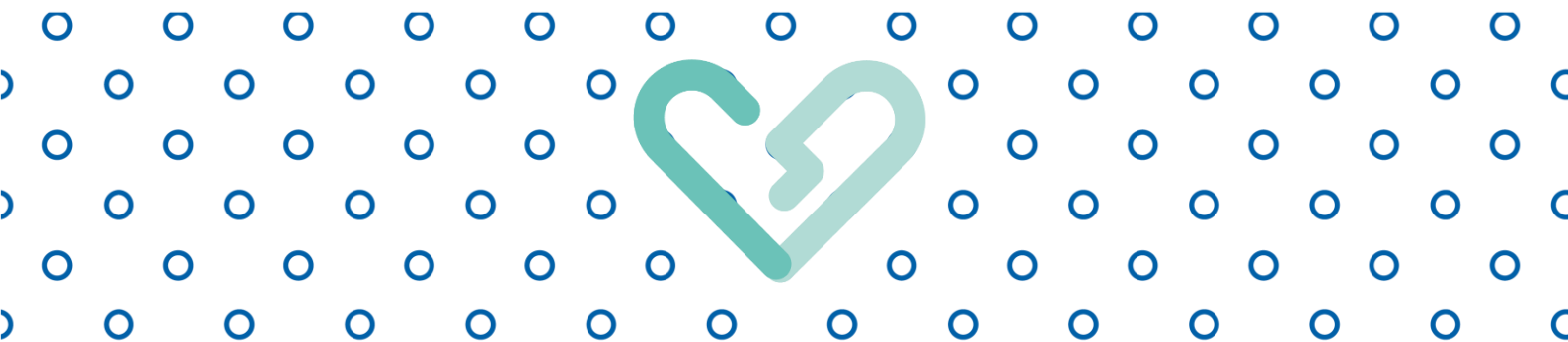
We can try to imagine what we'd say to a friend in our situation. We often give far fairer and better advice to others than we do to ourselves!

Feeling alone

Low mood can often leave people feeling lonely and isolated. This can have a negative impact on their emotional health and wellbeing.

What can I do?

There are a number of things people can do to help them feel less alone.



1. Join local support groups

It can be helpful to meet others who know how it feels and can share their coping strategies. Lots of groups also organise social events and activities to help boost people's mood and improve their wellbeing. The Mind website provides lots of information about support groups in your area.

People can also visit online forums where they can read other people's experiences and/or share their own. Find out more at [friendsinneed.co.uk](https://www.friendsinneed.co.uk)

2. Pursue what interests you

The internet or local councils can provide information about group classes or activities in your area that you might enjoy.

Being around other people who share the same interests with you can also motivate you and help you to feel better.

3. Volunteer

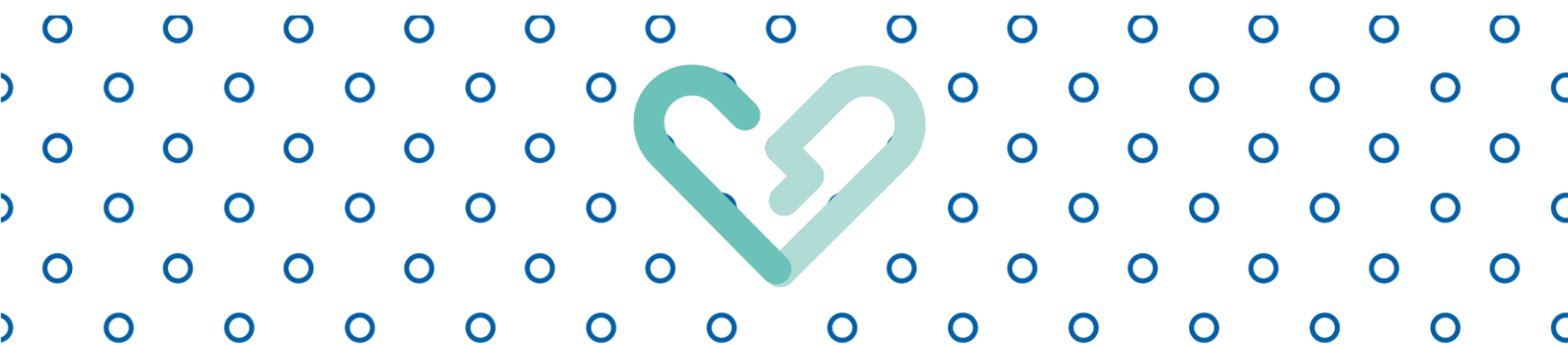
Helping other people by doing voluntary work is a great way of building relationships and feeling valued.

There are all sorts of ways people can volunteer, for example in hospitals, libraries or schools. Check out [do.it.org](https://www.doit.org.uk) for volunteering opportunities near you.

Top tips

Changing what we do

When tackling low mood, one of the best places to start is changing our less helpful behaviours. This is important, particularly if we aren't going out much and have stopped doing things we need to do (e.g. pay household bills) and/or previously found enjoyable.



By re-engaging in pleasurable and meaningful activities, we can quickly start feeling better again and gain a sense of achievement. Here are some examples of pleasurable activities:

- Going out with friends, e.g. to the cinema/theatre
- Participating in creative activities, e.g. painting
- Reading a favourite book
- Having a relaxing bath
- Cooking a favourite meal
- Learning a new skill, e.g. cooking a new meal, playing the guitar, learning a language
- Going for a walk

Changing how we think

When we feel low, we tend to think overly negative thoughts - which keep our low mood going. Some examples include:

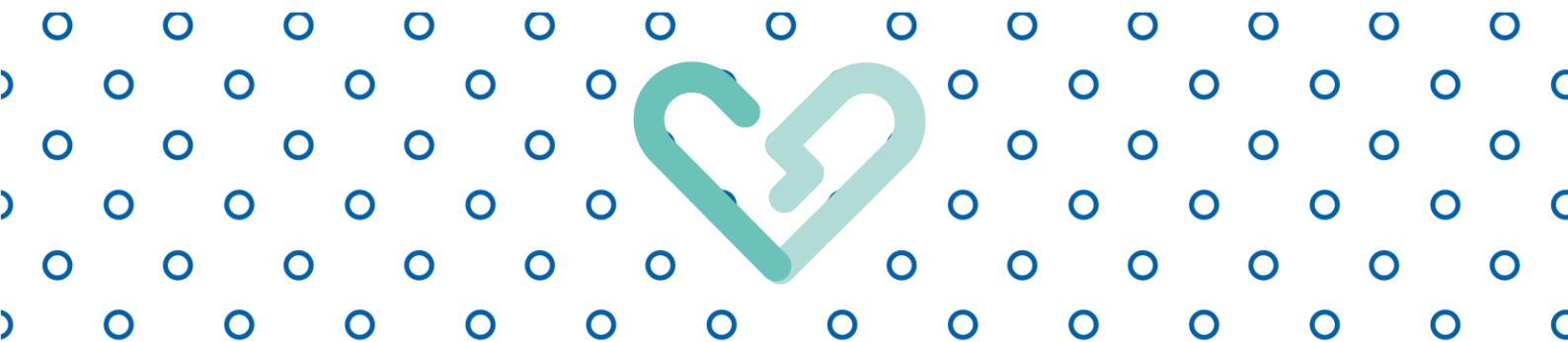
- 'I'm not good enough'
- 'People don't like me'
- 'Nothing will help'

These thoughts are often unrealistic. By questioning how true our thoughts are (e.g. "I am a failure"), we can come up with some more helpful thoughts. We can start by listing the evidence for (e.g. "I didn't finish my tasks on time yesterday") and against (e.g. "but, I have completed many others successfully in the past") our initial thought. We can then stick together a better-balanced thought (e.g. "Just because I didn't finish my tasks on time once, doesn't mean I am a failure").

Next time we catch ourselves thinking negatively, we can say "No. That's not true" either out loud or in our head. What would we say to a friend? We could encourage and praise ourselves, instead. The more we keep challenging our negative thinking, the better we will feel.

Physical exercise

Exercise is another effective way to improve our emotional health.



When we feel low, it is often difficult to find the energy or motivation to do any physical activity. In such cases, it may be helpful to start small (e.g. going for a walk around the block) and increase our activity by a little more (e.g. going to the local park) each week.

Besides improving our physical health, a bit of exercise can help us to burn off stress, give us more energy and provide us with a sense of accomplishment.

You can access our Find Out More on Physical Activity [here](#).

Sleep

Mood difficulties often disrupt sleep – and a disrupted sleep can make anyone's mood worse. Here are some tips on how to get a better night's sleep:

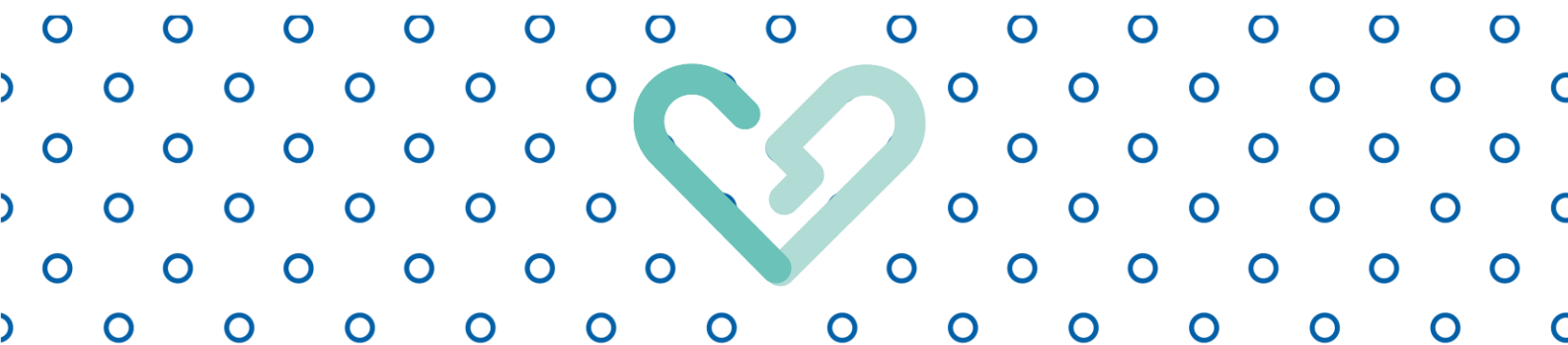
- Create a good sleeping environment (e.g. not too hot or cold room temperature, minimal or no noise, good mattress, well-aired bedroom).
- Set a standard bedtime and wake up time: our body works best when it is on a regular schedule.
- Avoid strenuous activity, heavy meals and bright lights for at least an hour before bedtime.
- Avoid checking the time in the middle of the night as it keeps you awake rather than letting you sleep.

Next steps

We all have sad moments. But when mood doesn't improve after a few days or weeks, it's not easy to get back on an even keel.

Foothold can provide more support through their website, or send an email to hello@myfoothold.org.

There is also a range of other support available for people on the issues we've looked at in this guide.



NHS

The NHS provide further information on their website. People can find out more about their symptoms and can complete a short questionnaire to assess their severity. They can also access information about local support groups.

[Click here](#)

Mind

Here people can access information about local peer support groups.

[Click here](#)

Big White Wall

Online forum: people can contact anonymously other people experiencing similar problems.

[Click here](#)

GP

They will be able to discuss things with you in more detail, offer support and advice as well as suggest next steps, if needed.

[Click here](#)

Samaritans

The Samaritans offer a safe place for people to talk and get support 24/7, every day of the year.

[Click here](#)

