



## Back to daily life

- a booklet on cognitive difficulties  
associated with depression

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associated with depression

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# About this booklet

This booklet is written for those of you who have depression and for those of you who have been declared well after a depressive episode, but still feel that your mental abilities are not what they used to be. The booklet is also written for family members, employers or colleagues of persons with depression who they want to support and understand better.

The purpose of this booklet is to give you an understanding of what cognitive difficulties are. This will enable you to verbalise what you experience, see and feel, and improve your ability to overcome cognitive difficulties associated with depression.



Cognitive difficulties affect both the individual suffering from depression and their family.

**Evidence shows that greater knowledge and insight improves our ability to overcome the difficulties we experience.**

This will reduce the risk of defeat, misunderstandings and misinterpretations in daily life. Whether you have depression or you are a family member of somebody with depression, the purpose of this booklet is to give you an understanding of what cognitive difficulties are. This will enable you to verbalise what you experience, see and feel, and improve your ability to resolve these challenges.

If you suffer from a depression or if you have previously had a depression, you can read in the booklet about what cognitive difficulties are, how they manifest themselves and how you can handle them. Knowing how your

mental abilities work and what influences them in a positive or in a negative way is an important step towards returning to your daily life as it was before your depressive episode. If you are a relative, colleague, or employer, you can read about how you can help create a better and more manageable daily life for the person with depression who experiences difficulties. You will gain knowledge about how to support and help establish new routines and habits that will make daily and work-related tasks more manageable.

Just verbalising the challenges you face will be a great help.



# Stories from **the daily life** **of people** with depression.



**The booklet takes outset in a series of personal stories. What these people have in common is that they have all had a depression and have subsequently experienced cognitive difficulties that impeded their daily life and work capacity.**

The persons are fictional, but their stories are based on a Danish study of life with cognitive difficulties. The study is based on a large number of interviews and observations with participation of people diagnosed with depression, relatives and health care professionals from all over Denmark. In this booklet, the results of the study are presented through personal stories and

situations from everyday life - work, family and leisure time - to demonstrate how cognitive difficulties associated with depression manifest themselves and their consequences for people with depression and their surroundings.

The case studies are accompanied by an explanation of the cognitive difficulties associated with depression experienced by the persons as well as practical advice and strategies for how to overcome each challenge. The booklet has been developed with clinical psychologist Louise Meldgaard Bruun, who has worked with cognition and depression for several years.

# Depression and cognitive difficulties

Depression is more than the well-known emotional symptoms like sadness, lack of interest, reduced energy and negative expectations of oneself, the surroundings and the future. Depression also affects the processes and functions which in combination constitute our mental abilities – also called cognition. This involves the ability to:

- Pay attention
- Maintain concentration
- Remember things
- Initiate actions
- Solve problems
- Keep track of things.

Many people with depression experience difficulties in these aspects of cognition, which persist even after mood symptoms have stabilised. After having recovered from depression, there may be a period where people experience significant cognitive difficulties. For some people this period is short, while for others it may last for months.

Cognitive difficulties are hard to understand and are often perceived by the individual as a sign of stupidity, laziness or the onset of dementia and are interpreted by other people as lack of motivation and interest.

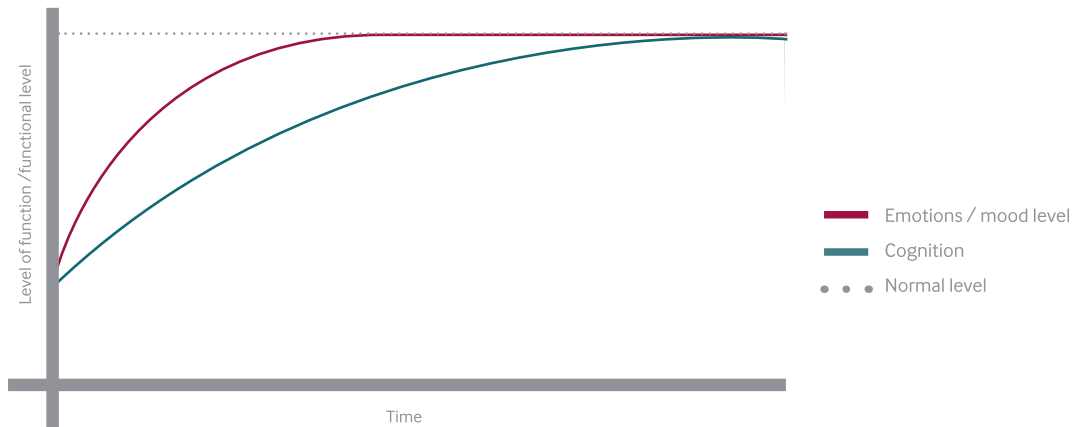
- **Depression and cognitive difficulties**



Knowing and being aware of cognitive difficulties associated with depression makes it easier to help.

- **Depression and cognitive difficulties**

**In depression the cognitive abilities may take longer to stabilise than the emotional well-being.**



**Regardless of how cognitive difficulties manifest themselves in the individual person and regardless of how long they persist, they can be a large burden**

Not only for the affected individual, but also for the close relatives, work colleagues and the social network. People often want to help but do not understand the significance and extent of the difficulties and are therefore not able to provide sufficient help.

Cognitive difficulties can increase stress levels in daily life because one may forget appointments, have difficulties concentrating at work, or lose track of things during the day. This will make it harder to fully recover after a depressive episode and increases the risk of relapse.

With this booklet we would like to provide you with knowledge about cognitive difficulties associated with depression, how they manifest themselves and how you can overcome them in your daily life.

# The consequences of cognitive difficulties associated with depression

The professional term for mental abilities is cognition. Our mental abilities consist of different cognitive functions, including the ability to perceive, pay attention, learn, remember, process information, and solve problems. If one or more of these functions is significantly impaired for some time, an individual is said to have cognitive difficulties. This can be seen in people with depression but can occur in other medical conditions.

In practice, cognitive difficulties manifest themselves as problems for the individual with directing and maintaining attention and with initiating, executing and completing common daily activities.

- **The consequences of cognitive difficulties**



Many people experience that they are  
unable to do things they used to do.



**Cognitive difficulties associated with depression may be a challenge to identify and understand – both for the individual experiencing them and for others around them.**

Cognitive difficulties may be perceived as a kind of mental chaos or despair that cannot readily be explained. Therefore, many people experience cognitive difficulties for a long time without realising it.

In practice, cognitive difficulties manifest themselves as problems for the individual with directing and maintaining attention and with initiating, executing and completing common daily activities. Many people also have problems learning and find that their ability to remember things is significantly impaired.

Because cognitive difficulties are so hard to understand, they are often perceived by the affected person as a sign of stupidity, laziness or as onset of dementia. This leads to self-blame, low self-esteem and worry. In addition, people around affected individuals often misinterpret the cognitive difficulties as lack of motivation and interest.

Luckily, however, cognitive difficulties can be resolved!

It is possible to improve the way you learn, remember and solve problems by becoming aware of how you can strengthen your cognitive skills. As a result, you improve your ability to solve tasks and participate in social situations, which will have a positive effect on your quality of life.

# Cognitive difficulties associated with depression

- how they manifest  
themselves and  
how they can  
be overcome.

Cognitive difficulties associated with depression can be resolved by being aware of the things that may have positive and negative effects on mental abilities.

**In depression, regardless of which particular cognitive difficulty you face in your daily life, there are two factors you should be particularly aware of and that are important for resolving cognitive difficulties. These are sleep and alcohol.**

### **Sleep**

A stable daily rhythm with sufficient sleep is an important prerequisite for optimal cognitive function. Insufficient sleep significantly affects our ability to maintain attention, solve problems, keep track of things and function in general in our daily life. Studies have shown that our cognitive resources improve with sleep and rest. It is therefore important that you get enough sleep and prioritise the breaks

you feel that you need during the day. Add fixed breaks to your daily schedule and try to go to bed at the same time every night and get up at the same time every morning.

### **Alcohol**

Alcohol affects cognition negatively, decreases the ability to solve problems and to keep track of things. Your memory is affected negatively and you may experience memory loss. With a moderate alcohol intake, the ability to think improves as the intoxication dissipates, but as alcohol affects sleep negatively, alcohol consumption may have a negative effect on cognition. If you have cognitive difficulties it is therefore recommended that you keep your alcohol consumption at a minimum or completely avoid alcohol.

# Attention and concentration

Depression affects attention. It becomes difficult to concentrate and actively regulate your attention. The filter that sorts relevant from irrelevant information becomes more penetrable, so that external and internal perceptions and sensations have easier access to your consciousness: the noise from street, other people's conversation at the table next to you, the music on the radio, disturbing thoughts, bodily discomfort etc.

- **Attention and concentration**

It can be difficult to filter all the impressions.



Be sure to take breaks – you can add short breaks to your regular schedule to give yourself time to relax and rest between tasks and activities.

## This may manifest itself by:

- Difficulty staying focused on one task and losing concentration quickly
- Difficulty dividing the attention between simultaneous tasks
  - e.g. listening and taking notes at the same time
- Difficulty in shifting attention from one task to another
  - e.g. when you are interrupted by a phone call while working on a task
- Difficulty carrying out a coherent, concentrated conversation with your companion at the table at a party
- Difficulty listening
- Difficulty reading
- Difficulty concentrating on watching TV

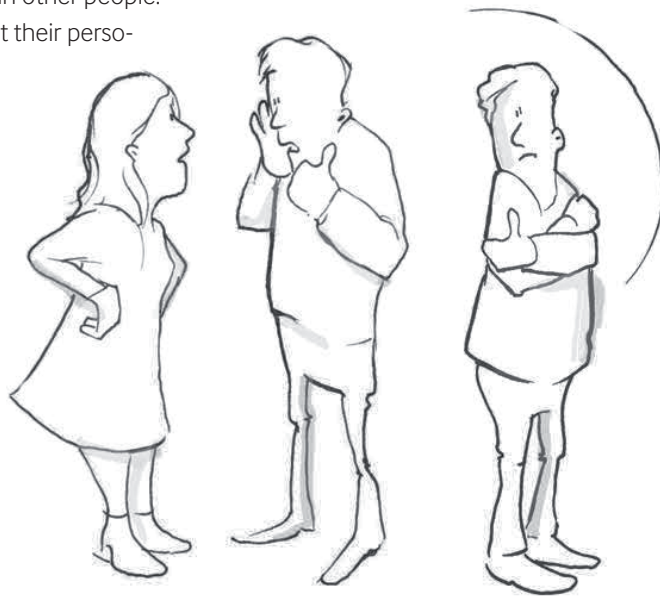
- **Attention and concentration**

**Many people living with depression experience that their ability to stay attentive and concentrate for longer time periods is impaired and they can have problems performing more than one task at a time.**

Problems with attention make it difficult to relate to the experiences of other people. Many people with depression will find that their cognitive problems impair their ability to relate to and show an interest in other people. This will lead them to think that their perso-

nality has changed and mistakenly conclude that they have become more selfish.

At the same time, many people with depression experience problems with filtering information and maintaining attention when there are a lot of people around them such as at a party. Many people express that it is a big problem as they find it difficult to participate in large social gatherings. Frequently, the symptoms are interpreted by people outside as a sign that the person is uninterested in socialising.



Cognitive difficulties cause problems with participation in social activities.



## Daily life situations

Sarah:

“When I talk to my boyfriend or colleagues I feel that it is difficult to be present in the conversation. It is as if I forget to listen to what they say and I get distracted very easily - even though I really want to hear what they have to say.”


Even when Sarah is among her friends she is thinking about her own problems – problems that keep going around her head and that she is unable to put aside. Therefore, she has problems concentrating and participating in the conversations when her friends talk about their lives. Sarah’s friend Maria is telling the group that she has problems in her relationship, but afterwards Sarah has not even realised that something is wrong.

- **Attention and concentration**

Mia:

“I am not able to be a relaxed part of such a group engaging in small talk. If people ask about different things simultaneously, my mind goes blank. I am totally exhausted and it may take me several days to recover from a party.”

On Friday, Mia is at a large birthday party at her friends' house. She feels overwhelmed by so many people and is unable to focus on one person at a time. All the conversations penetrate her mind and she is unable to filter the impressions. She feels uncomfortable and has to sit down in her friend's bedroom to calm down. After the party Mia is extremely tired for several days. She stays at home the rest of the weekend to avoid places with a lot of people. On Sunday, Mia starts to feel isolated. She notices that staying at home without having any contact with other people is not good for her. Mia's colleagues notice that she does not go out that often. They don't know that she has depression and cognitive difficulties, so they perceive her as shy and as someone who doesn't have a need to make friends with her colleagues.



Too many feelings  
may be overwhelming.

## Daily life situations

Sarah:

“Previously, I could cook dinner and help my son with his homework at the same time. Now, I lose track of things if people talk to me while I prepare breakfast. I always yell at my son. Then I apologise, but the damage is done.”

Sarah is cooking when her son enters the kitchen and asks for permission to go to a party this week. While her son is talking, an egg timer goes off and Sarah loses track of things and is unable to handle the interruption. She shouts at her son. Sarah feels bad about having yelled at her son. She apologises for her behaviour, but still feels that she is a bad mother. She does not understand why she cannot behave as she wants to towards her son and it worries her the rest of the day. Sarah's son experiences his mother as being more often in a bad mood and less present. He feels that he cannot talk to her about anything right now because he is unsure how she will react.

- **Attention and concentration**

Michael:

“It feels like I am unable to think far ahead. For example, if I have to call the local council, I try to prepare what I want to say, but it still goes much too fast and I don’t catch what is being said. I often have to call back to get it sorted out.”

- **Attention and concentration**



Many people suffer from  
a guilty conscience.

## Good advice

Most daily activities require attention. In addition, our daily life is full of interruptions which we, under normal circumstances, are able to handle, although they claim all our attention and challenge our ability to concentrate. Problems with attention will affect most of the daily activities and tasks, and background noise and mess that we did not notice before will become distracting. In order to resolve these challenges, it is important to consider how and when tasks are performed and which disturbances can be minimised. Small changes may have a big impact on your attention.

### Strategies you can use:

1. Be sure to take breaks – you can add short breaks to your regular schedule to give yourself time to relax and rest between tasks and activities.
2. Ensure that your surroundings are quiet. Turn off the radio and TV when you need to solve problems or concentrate on a conversation.
3. Put a 'Busy' sign on your door when you need to concentrate on an assignment.
4. Avoid places with too much noise or too many people. For instance, shop at times when you know few people are in the stores and avoid driving during rush hour.
5. Agree to meet your friends at your place or their place where you can have quiet conversations, or visit a café in the middle of the day when there are few people.
6. Limit the number of tasks, and work on one task at a time.
7. Try to make your own home office where there are fewer distractions.
8. Let the answering machine record messages while you are working on a task so you don't get interrupted unnecessarily.
9. Take a break from reading or limit reading to shorter, reader-friendly texts that you can read during the times of the day when you have the most energy.

# Memory

Depression can also cause memory problems and many people have problems remembering even after recovering from the depression. You may experience that you are unable to remember where you put your keys or forget an appointment you just made. Memory problems are a consequence of attention difficulties. When you are not paying attention, you do not register information and you may have problems maintaining your attention when you search your memory.

Establish regular routines  
when possible, e.g. when you need to  
take your medication, when you get up  
and when you go to bed.



## Memory problems may show as:

- Difficulty with remembering appointments
- Difficulty with remembering information even when you just received it
- Difficulty with remembering names
- Misplacing your things, e.g. mobile phone, wallet, and keys
- Repeating the same things several times

## Daily life situations

Grace:

"I forget everything! I just spend so much time looking for things, my mobile, important letters, keys, etc. Everything should have a designated location because I simply cannot remember where I have put things. It makes me sad because it seems like I am stupid."



- **Memory**

Kevin:

"I have lost confidence in my own professional abilities. Every little task seems difficult and tiring. I sometimes forget things I have just been told. It is as if things do not really sink in and become vague. I have to search inside my head for things and it is difficult to sort the information. I absorb almost everything, but remember nothing a few minutes later."

Kevin has always had a near-photographic memory and has developed a unique knowledge of rules and legislations within his field. One day he cannot remember a legal paragraph he ought to know because he uses it frequently in his work. He has to look it up, which delays his work. It happens several times that day. In addition to delaying Kevin's work, the memory problems make him lose confidence in himself. He feels that he is no longer as efficient and questions what he is worth for his employer. The negative thoughts haunt him and make the rest of the day's work even harder.

## Good advice

Memory problems associated with depression are typically difficulties with recalling what has been said and with remembering appointments or tasks that need to be done.

There are a number of tips and tricks that may reduce your memory problems.

### **Strategies you can use:**

1. Establish regular routines when possible, e.g. when to take your medication.
2. Find designated places for your things in your home and your purse, like for your mobile and your keys.
3. Use a calendar or your mobile to remember what has happened and to plan what is going to happen.
4. Use the reminder setting on your mobile or ask other people to help you remember appointments.



# Getting started

The ability to initiate actions is often impaired in depression. It becomes harder to get from thought to action and to get started on many of the daily chores. This is not due to lack of will, but when the ability to initiate actions is impaired, you will inevitably postpone tasks and work. This leads to feelings of guilt and will often lead to negative thoughts about oneself. People outside may mistakenly interpret this as laziness and lack of motivation.

Problems with initiating actions  
will manifest themselves in  
several ways, including:

- You do not show up for appointments.
- You do not take the initiative to help out with house chores –  
like doing the dishes, helping with washing, taking care of minor repairs, etc.
- You cannot take up recreational activities that you engaged in before  
you got ill.

## Daily life situations

Anne:

"I am normally the initiator and organiser in our family and now it feels like I cannot get anything done. I cannot get started even though there are lots of things to do. They are not difficult tasks, but things I normally like doing, such as cooking, shopping, planning birthday parties, etc., I cannot seem to get started. It is as if I just give up before even having started."

Peter:

"It feels like I have lost my self-discipline. I really want to start getting some exercise and change my eating habits, but for some reason I just never get started."

- **Getting started**

Jack:

"Despite the fact that half a day's concentrated work would save me €30.000 in taxes, I could not manage to do it. It took me a year and a half to organise the documents - I just could not get it done. Every time I tried, it was too overwhelming for me. It was like I just could not find out how to get started even though I have done this before."

"I am constantly making an attempt, but nothing happens. I cannot pull myself together. Every time I get interrupted it is as if I have to mentally start all over again, and I cannot concentrate on things for extended periods of time. I feel paralysed."

Jack wakes up at 7:30 in the morning but stays in bed instead of getting up like he normally does. He looks at a newspaper from his night stand without reading any articles. Nevertheless, two hours pass before he gets out of bed. In the afternoon Jack starts having doubts as to whether he can keep his business running when he cannot even get out of the house in the morning. Jack feels that he lets himself and his family down and that he is useless. Jack's wife Marian becomes more and more afraid that their financial situation may not be sustainable. She imagines scenarios where they will have to move out of the house if Jack's income decreases permanently.





## Good advice

Many people find that it becomes difficult or impossible for them to initiate their daily activities. It may be difficult to motivate oneself in the morning and many people have problems getting out of bed. Difficulties are enhanced because the daily routines collapse as a result of the illness and the daily structure has to be rebuilt after a depressive episode. This places great demands on the ability to initiate actions and other cognitive functions.

Many people discontinue activities that used to give them joy and give life a meaning. This is related to, amongst other things, the reduced ability to get started with tasks. It can be difficult to understand why you are not able to start doing things you used to find pleasure in. Some people perceive their change in behaviour as a change in interests – not as part of their depression.

### Strategies you can use:

1. Try to structure your day as much as possible. Establish regular routines for when you eat, clean, work, etc.
2. Use a calendar to plan and structure your day.
3. Ask other people to help you organise your tasks if you have problems structuring your day yourself.
4. Make arrangements with others – family, friends, colleagues – to do things together and accompany each other to activities.
5. Give yourself rewards for getting started on activities.



# Overview and problem solving

When you resume your daily life after a depressive episode you may experience significant difficulties with managing tasks that previously caused no problems. Many people emphasise that they find it harder to contemplate, structure and plan tasks that demand abilities to keep track, control and timing. This may be things like planning the food shopping for dinner and cooking, where several things need to be done simultaneously, or tasks at work that require you to work on different tasks at the same time.

- **Overview and problem solving**



It may be necessary to ask other people to help you structure a work assignment or your daily life and get assistance with completing an assignment.

Difficulties with keeping track and with planning can lead to great frustration which in turn may result in mood swings in the affected person – often because these are daily situations which previously caused no problems but now suddenly have become difficult to tackle and overcome.

## This will manifest itself in the following ways:

- It is difficult to plan an activity. For instance, it might be difficult to identify what is needed to repair something in the house, or organise a meeting at work, or prepare a project for school.
- You leave tasks incomplete.
- You find it difficult to structure the necessary steps for what you plan to do. For instance it may be difficult to get organised and plan the cleaning of your garage, or of your desk or computer.
- You find it difficult to plan your tasks for the day.
- Problems with handling unexpected situations or challenges, like when things do not go according to plan.
- You find distinguishing between important and unimportant issues a real challenge.

## Daily life situations

Mia:

"I feel that I have problems with multitasking and I am constantly afraid that there is something I have not taken into account. Previously, I could have a thousand things going at once without losing track. Now I feel stressed by not knowing how to get things finished off. It feels like I constantly have too many balls in the air and can't handle it."

Mia has to plan meetings about the status of several deliveries, but finds it overwhelming to decide which colleagues she needs to talk to about which projects. She cannot keep track of who has to take care of what and in the end she calls everybody in to one big joint meeting. The meeting ends up becoming very chaotic, which is atypical for the otherwise very organised Mia.

After the meeting Mia is mad at herself for not being able to live up to the expectations that she imagines her colleagues have. Instead of talking to her colleagues about her problems, she is ashamed and tries to hide them. Mia's mood deteriorates due to the day's events. Mia's boss notices Mia's unstructured scheduling of the meeting. She wonders what is going on and is considering whether she can change Mia's duties, but does not reach a conclusion. Mia's performance fluctuates a lot from day to day, but her boss does not see a pattern.

- **Overview and problem solving**

Sarah:

"The worst part is when things don't go as expected or as they used to. It can be a situation where a customer calls with a job that requires immediate action in the middle of the day and asks me to solve it as soon as possible, or if there is unexpected road construction on the way home that forces me to go a different way than I normally do. It feels as if my brain is constantly under too much pressure."

Sarah has been visiting her parents and is driving home when she is suddenly directed down a road she doesn't know because there is road construction further ahead. She drives down the street which leads to a residential area.

Shortly thereafter she starts feeling uncomfortable. Sarah drives around the unfamiliar streets for a while without noticing where she is going. Eventually she has to pull over. She cannot handle having to figure out how to get home and ends up calling her husband and asks him to come and get her.

Michael:

"I have problems driving the car like I normally do. I have become worse at finding my way and I get totally exhausted if I drive during rush hour. Things that used to be easy now feel like a very demanding task."

## Good advice

After a depressive episode it is very common to experience problems planning and keeping track of things when you need to solve a task – also when it is an ordinary daily chore like cooking, shopping or simple work or study assignments.

Impaired ability to keep track means that you may quickly feel overwhelmed. The confusion can discourage you and make you lose your temper if things don't go according to plan or if you get interrupted. These reactions are not necessarily perceived as being part of the depression and you become unhappy by seeing yourself react inappropriately towards people close to you, but may be unable to do anything about it.

When problem-solving becomes overwhelming it often means that the task or issue does not get managed. You may avoid or postpone the task, which means that the tasks pile up. This may lead to an increasing feeling of chaos and negative feelings of inadequacy.

In order to support the ability to keep track and solve problems it is a good idea to establish some regular routines and systems that can help you structure your day and the individual tasks. It may be necessary to ask other people to help you structure a work assignment or your daily life and get assistance with completing the assignments.



**- Overview and problem solving**

**Strategies you can use:**

1. Use a calendar to structure your day. If you record your appointments and tasks in the calendar, it becomes easier to keep track of the tasks you have started and plan your day.
2. Always bring your calendar with you when possible so you can keep track of your day and your tasks. Remember to allocate sufficient time for the individual tasks and to allow time for breaks and rest.
3. Try not to work on too many tasks at the same time. Start slowly and increase the number of tasks gradually when you feel ready to commit to more.
4. Don't be afraid to ask for help and support from a relative or a colleague. Especially in the beginning, many people need help with structuring and planning.
5. Agree with the person who supports you about which tasks need to be done, how many need to be done, and when the tasks need to be completed.
6. Schedule concrete social activities that do not require much preparation and planning. Meet a friend for a cup of coffee or take-away, or ask your friend to cook.



# If you want to know more

You can look for more information about cognitive difficulties in relation to depression here:

## Websites

Visit [rethinkdepression.com](http://rethinkdepression.com)

## Literature

"Saml tankerne – sådan håndterer du kognitive vanskeligheder ved stress, angst og depression" by Louise Meldgaard Bruun (In Danish only).

