

Techniques are helping to tackle depression without resorting to drugs

BY HALLEY COHEN

In a room at the University of Exeter, 40 people are sitting quietly. No-one is speaking but if you listen carefully, you can hear the soft, steady sound of the group breathing. Though two blackbirds take up their raucous cry just outside the window and a car rumbles by, the sense of tranquillity and calm within the room remains unbroken.

An observer would think that this is a group of people at ease, centred within themselves. The group is diverse, made up of men and women, the oldest in his 70s, the youngest in her 20s, teachers, a carpenter, homemakers, a hospital manager, a University cleaner and several retirees.

However, it's not their diversity that makes them interesting. What makes this group fascinating is that each and every person has suffered from depression, often on and off throughout their lives. They have all attended the mindfulness classes the University of Exeter's Mood Disorders Centre has been offering since 2004 to help people with a history of depression learn new ways to stay well.

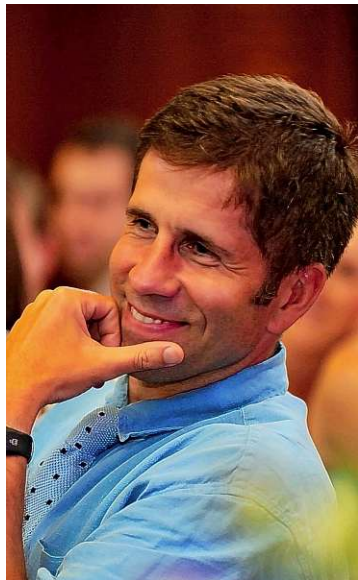
Today, they have returned for a booster session at the Mood Disorders Centre to help them hone their life skills, reconnect with their mindfulness therapists and meet like-minded people with whom they can share experiences.

The two mindfulness therapists, Alison and Claire, effortlessly guide the participants in a 20-minute mindfulness practise.

Depression is a common problem, affecting as many as one in four people during their lives. Sufferers may experience feelings of hopelessness, tiredness, low self-esteem, sleeping problems and physical symptoms. They may stop going out, or even getting out of bed. Relationships and work can be difficult to maintain.

Professor Willem Kuyken, co-founder of the Mood Disorders Centre, said: "What makes depression even more debilitating is that people who have suffered it even once have a 50 per cent chance of having a recurrence; after two episodes, they have a 70 per cent chance of being struck again and after three episodes the chance of a recurrence is 90 per cent. The type of depression we tend to see in the health service can best be thought of as a recurrent and debilitating condition."

How can people vulnerable to depression stay well in the long term? Dr Richard Byng, a GP in the South West said: "At the moment, many are prescribed antidepressants on a maintenance dose over many years. This is a successful treatment for some, but



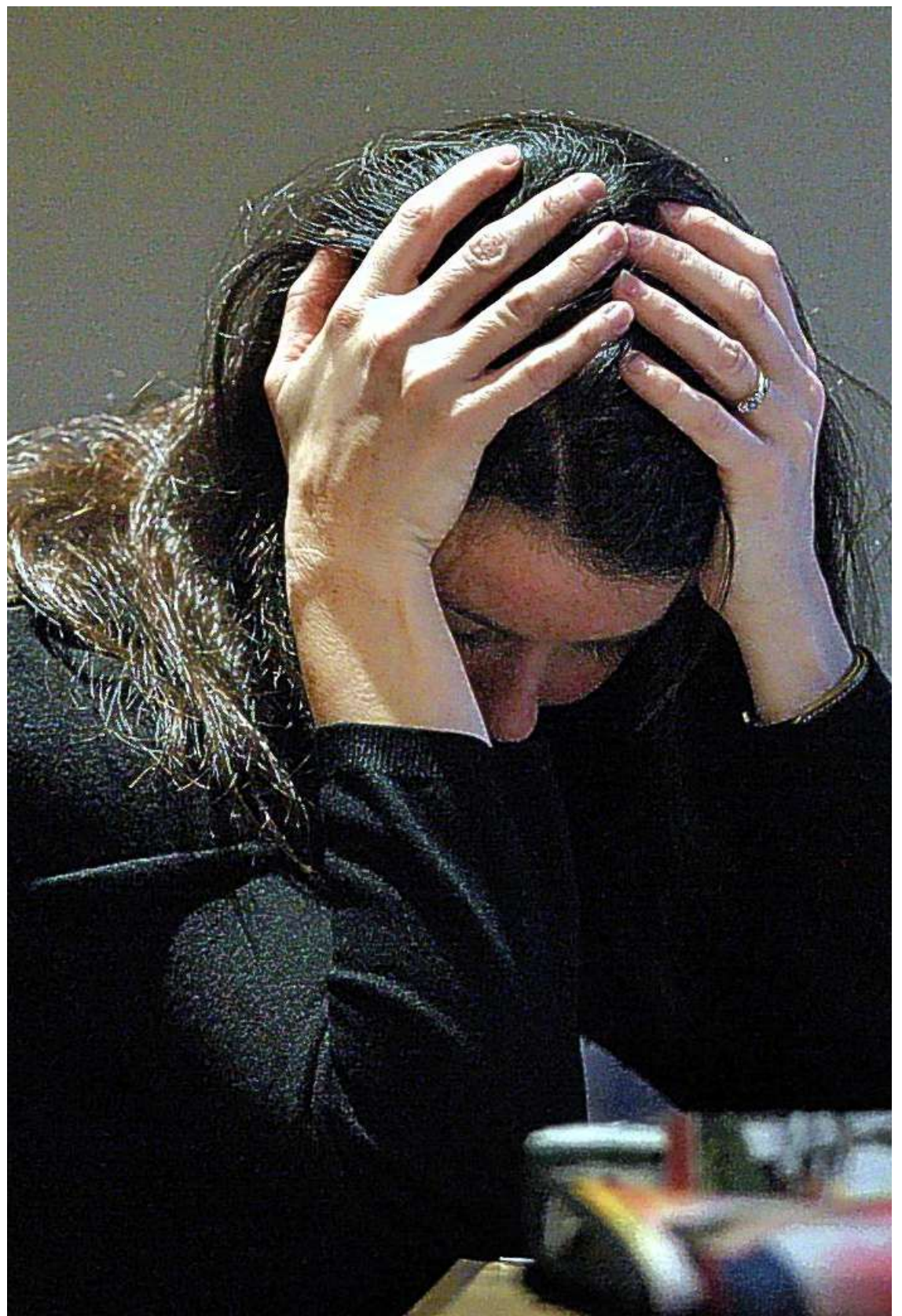
Professor Willem Kuyken, co-founder of the Mood Disorders Centre at Exeter

there are downsides, including unpleasant side-effects. Many people also dislike the idea of taking a drug long-term and would prefer a treatment that looks at the underlying causes of the depression itself."

This is where mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) comes in. This treatment combines cognitive behavioural therapy with mindfulness techniques like meditation, breathing exercises and stretching to give them a new awareness of their own body. This enhanced awareness enables them to recognise the signs of oncoming depression, such as tension and fatigue, so that they can stop the cycle before it takes hold. MBCT teaches them to focus on the present moment instead of dwelling on the past or future, and to let go of negative thoughts as they come up in their minds. The Mental Health Foundation, the UK's leading charity on mental health research and policy, has excellent information about MBCT on its website (visit www.be mindful.co.uk/mbct/about).

Helen (her name has been changed) has suffered from depression on and off for years. After attending an MBCT course, she reflected: "My daughter says that she thinks it has really changed my outlook on life as she thinks I look at things more positively and am not as negative as I used to be. I am sure she is right as I do feel much more positive about things and I don't let the little things build up like they used to. I talk to myself, telling myself I'm being silly. This seems to work for me."

Although it is a relatively new approach, at least three large-scale



Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, or MBCT, has been shown to almost halve the chances of depression recurring

studies have shown that MBCT helps people with recurring depression stay well in the long term and, vitally, cuts in half the chances of becoming depressed again. MBCT has proved so effective that the National Institutes for Clinical Excellence (NICE) now recommends it as a treatment of choice for sufferers of recurrent depression. In 2009, NICE took the strong action of recommending that the NHS take steps to make it widely available. The Mental Health Foundation has also given this treatment its stamp of approval and is now leading a campaign to encourage the NHS to offer MBCT (visit www.mental-health.org.uk).

Join study into benefits of MBCT as an alternative therapy

The Mood Disorders Centre at the University of Exeter is at the forefront of MBCT. It offers mindfulness classes across much of Devon and trains MBCT therapists.

It is also running several government-funded large-scale studies that look further into how MBCT is an alternative to long-term antidepressants and whether parents with a history of depression might particularly benefit from this treatment.

If you have suffered from depression and would like to find out more about mindfulness-based cognitive

therapy or the research in this area, visit the Mood Disorders Centre website at www.exeter.ac.uk/mooddisorders or www.prevent-southwest.org.uk/index.php. You can also contact them directly by phone on 01392 726102, text on 0758 181 1048, or email prevent@ex.ac.uk.

The centre is currently recruiting for a study of mindfulness as an alternative to antidepressant medication and mindfulness for parents with a history of depression. If you are interested in taking part, contact the study teams via the details above.

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