Ben Carey Donaldson

SELF & SYSTEM · SELF-ASSESSMENT SERIES

Depression & Low Mood Self-Assessment

PDF Self-Assessment · IFS-Informed Reflection

Explore low mood patterns and what your system may be protecting.

IMPORTANT NOTE

This tool is for educational self-reflection only. It is based on the PHQ-9 (Patient Health Questionnaire-9), developed by Spitzer, Kroenke, and Williams (1999), and is reproduced here with appropriate attribution. It does not constitute a clinical assessment and cannot diagnose depression, bipolar disorder, or any other mental health condition. If your responses indicate significant distress, please speak with a qualified mental health professional or your GP. If you are in immediate distress, please contact a crisis line in your country.

WHAT THIS RESOURCE IS

This self-assessment draws on the PHQ-9 framework and adds IFS-informed interpretive framing. Rather than producing a clinical score, it invites you to explore how low mood, flatness, or emotional withdrawal may reflect protective patterns in your inner system — parts that shut down, withdraw, or numb in response to what has felt too difficult to carry. Use it as a starting point for curiosity, not as a verdict.

HOW TO USE IT

Work through each section at a pace that feels comfortable. There are no right or wrong responses — this is a reflection tool, not a test. After completing the questions, move to the Interpretive Profiles section and read through each description. Notice which one resonates most, or where you recognise a familiar pattern.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Carey Donaldson is an IFS Level 1 practitioner, meditation guide, and group facilitator based in the Fontainebleau-Paris region of France. He works online with English- and French-speaking clients across Europe and internationally, and writes about IFS, emotional wellbeing, and the inner systems that shape how we live and relate.

01

Mood, Energy and Interest

Over the past two weeks, how often have you been affected by any of the following?

01

Little interest or pleasure in doing things you usually enjoy.

Rate from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always):

1	2	3	4	5

Never — Almost always

02

Feeling down, low, or without much hope.

Rate from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always):

1	2	3	4	5

Never — Almost always

03

Having noticeably less energy than usual — a kind of heaviness or flatness.

Rate from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always):

1	2	3	4	5

Never — Almost always

02

Body, Sleep and Thought Patterns

Over the past two weeks, how often have you experienced the following?

04

Trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or sleeping more than usual.

Rate from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always):

1	2	3	4	5

Never — Almost always

05

Feeling tired or having little energy — even after rest.

Rate from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always):

1	2	3	4	5

Never — Almost always

06

Changes in appetite — eating noticeably more or less than usual.

Rate from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always):

1	2	3	4	5

Never — Almost always

07

Difficulty concentrating, or finding that your mind feels slow or foggy.

Rate from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always):

1	2	3	4	5

Never — Almost always

03

Self-Relation and Inner System

These questions invite you to look at how the inner system is responding — with curiosity, not judgment.

08

Feeling disconnected from yourself — as though you're going through the motions.

Rate from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always):

1	2	3	4	5

Never — Almost always

09

A sense of numbness, flatness, or emotional absence where feeling used to be.

Rate from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always):

1	2	3	4	5

Never — Almost always

10

Thoughts that things won't improve, or that you are a burden to others.

Rate from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always):

1	2	3	4	5

Never — Almost always

04

Interpretive Profiles

Read through the profiles below and notice which description resonates most strongly — or where you recognise a familiar pattern. There is no score. No profile is a verdict.

The System in Quiet Shutdown

You may notice a flatness that is hard to name — not sadness exactly, but an absence of aliveness. Things that used to matter feel distant. You are functioning, but not quite present. In IFS terms, this often reflects a system that has had to manage a great deal of pain, and has learned that the safest response is to turn the volume down. The numbness is not a failure — it is a form of protection. Something underneath has been asking for rest, or for a kind of witnessing it hasn't yet received.

What would it mean to be curious about the quiet — rather than trying to fill or fix it?

The Exhausted Protector

You may have kept going for a long time, pushing through, making it work. The low mood arrives not with drama but with a kind of heaviness — a signal that the parts managing and maintaining can no longer sustain their pace. Sleep is difficult. Motivation is unreliable. There is often an inner voice that says you should be doing more, even as something else is quietly asking to stop. This pattern often reflects parts that learned to equate safety with output — and never received permission to rest.

What do the parts that have been working hardest actually need right now?

The Withdrawn Exile

There may be a quality of sadness or grief that feels older than the present moment — as though something unfinished is making itself known. Social withdrawal, difficulty trusting, a sense of not quite belonging. These often reflect exiled parts carrying experiences of loss, disconnection, or pain that were never fully processed. The system has been working to keep these parts at a distance, but the effort itself becomes its own kind of heaviness.

Is there a part of you that has been waiting to be seen — without needing to explain itself first?

WHAT TO DO WITH THIS

There is no single right response to what emerged here. If one profile resonated strongly, you might simply stay with it for a moment — notice what it brings up, what it clarifies, or what it makes you want to look away from. That noticing is already the beginning of a different relationship to what's been happening.

A GENTLE NEXT STEP

If you'd like to understand more about what was happening in your responses, the paired article — IFS for Depression and Emotional Numbness: When the System Shuts Down to Survive — goes into the IFS framework in depth: what shutdown and numbness actually represent in the inner system, and what the process of change can look like from this perspective.

IF YOU'D LIKE SUPPORT

If what surfaced in this reflection feels significant, or if you have been experiencing persistent low mood, emotional numbness, or hopelessness, please consider speaking with a qualified mental health professional. If you are in immediate distress, please contact a crisis line in your country.

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Ben Carey Donaldson is an IFS Level 1 practitioner. He is not a licensed psychologist, psychiatrist, or medical doctor. Resources on this site are educational in nature and are not a substitute for professional mental health care.

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