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## Using poetry to explore mental health & emotional wellbeing

### Let's talk about... depression

with 3 poems from ***You Are Not Alone*** by Shauna Darling Robertson

[www.troikabooks.com/you-are-not-alone](http://www.troikabooks.com/you-are-not-alone)

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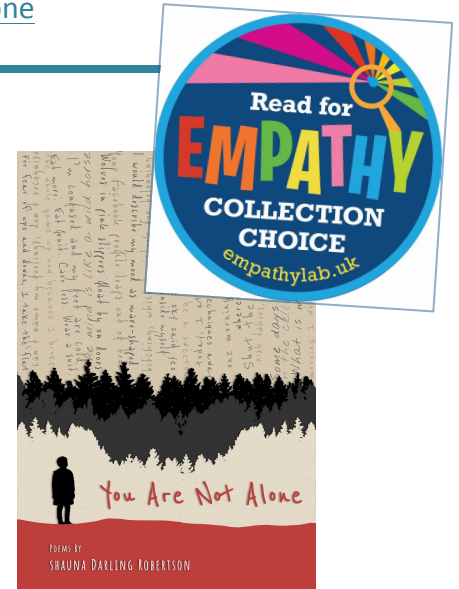
Poetry can be a great resource for exploring our thoughts and feelings, providing a 'way in' to help us connect with different parts of ourselves and communicate with others, particularly when it comes to challenging conversations. Sometimes it can be helpful to explore a topic from a 'safe distance' using scenarios or characters in a poem rather than about talking about ourselves, especially when we're in a group setting.

***You Are Not Alone*** by Shauna Darling Robertson (Troika, 2023) is a collection of poems all about mental health and wellbeing, written with teens and young adults in mind.

Just like our physical health, our mental health can fluctuate over the course of our lives, or even from day to day. The poems in this collection consider a wide variety of experiences, from how it can feel to live with different mental health conditions, to what it's like dealing with the everyday pressures and challenges faced by young people today.

This guide offers some ideas for using a few of the poems in a therapeutic, classroom, community or family setting to explore themes related to depression.

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## Poem 1: 'Down'

Possible themes: Mood swings | Depression | Bipolar & other mood disorders

Begin by allowing participants to read the poem quietly to themselves. Then invite one or two people to read the poem aloud, so you can hear it in different voices.

### Exploring the poem in a therapeutic, classroom, community or family setting

1. What might be some of the possible reasons or triggers for the person in the poem feeling 'down'? Many things can affect our moods at different times, from our thoughts and our body rhythms to various lifestyle factors, external events and, in more serious cases, certain mental health conditions. See how many different possibilities you can come up with.
2. "They call them moods": who do think 'they' could be?
3. Why do 'they' and the person in the poem use such different words to describe the person's experiences?
4. Which words and descriptions do you find more meaningful? What makes them meaningful to you?
5. What does the final verse say to you? What does it leave you thinking and feeling?
6. If you could speak to the person in the poem, what might you want to say to them? Is there anything you'd like to ask them?

#### DOWN

They call them moods  
but suppose they're tsunamis,  
mile-high walls of black water  
thundering towards the guts, the lungs.

They call them swings  
but what if they're wild dogs  
howling for the moon  
while settling for scraps of rain, apathy.

They call them episodes  
but let's say they're hurricanes  
ripping up routines, days and hope by the roots  
and pummelling the sunrise to rubble.

They call them bouts  
but to me these are soldiers  
marching to the thud of muddled drums  
in vice-tight boots under enemy orders.

Still, sometimes  
tsunamis subside.  
Wild dogs nap.  
Hurricanes abate.  
Soldiers take leave.

Shauna Darling Robertson. *You Are Not Alone*. Troika, 2023.

#### Some suggestions for a classroom setting

- Teachers could invite students to pair up or form small groups to discuss question 1 and come up with a list of answers, which could then be shared with the whole group in a feedback session. Students could report back verbally and the teacher gather and summarise responses (whiteboard, flip-chart, IWB, etc). Alternatively, students could write their responses on Post-it notes which could be then pasted up and viewed / discussed by all. Or, an interactive online poll (eg. [www.mentimeter.com](http://www.mentimeter.com)) could be used to gather and display responses. The discussion could also be extended to include grouping the possible triggers into different types or categories, with the categories decided by students.
- Questions 2 & 3 could each be tackled as a whole class discussion, in which students share their ideas and responses verbally. Alternatively, students could pair up or form small groups to discuss their responses, and then share them with the wider group as part of a subsequent whole class discussion.
- For question 4, students could again pair up or form small groups to discuss their responses, followed by some voluntary verbal feedback from each pair / group to the class.
- Question 5 could be another whole class discussion.
- Question 6 could be set as a short individual writing exercise. Teachers might like to encourage informal forms of writing here, such as stream of consciousness and interior monologue writing. For example, you could ask students to imagine that they're the person in the poem's friend, and to write continuously, without stopping, in response to the two prompts in question 5 (teachers could time their free writing eg. 3 minutes).

This frees everyone up to have an immediate personal response without worrying about 'writing something good'. Afterwards, you could invite students to use their rough notes as the basis for a poem, a short-short story or a piece of prose.

## Extension activities

1. The poet has made a short film based on this poem, which you can view at [www.troikabooks.com/you-are-not-alone](http://www.troikabooks.com/you-are-not-alone). How does watching the multimedia film affect your experience of the poem? Does it alter your sense of the poem at all, or your feelings about the person in it? Why / how?
2. Choose one verse from the poem (one of verses 1-4, not verse 5).
  - a) Divide a sheet of paper into three sections of roughly equal size (feel free to use lines, folds or get creative!) and number your sections from 1 to 3.
  - b) Take a few moments to re-read your chosen verse. Imagine you're the person in the poem and you're experiencing what they're describing in that verse. In section 1 of your paper, note down as many words as you can to capture how you might feel, emotionally and also physically in your body (eg. lost, tense, invaded, dry mouth, overwhelm, alone, drowning, etc .
  - c) For each of the words you noted in section 1, write down a word that feels like an opposite of that or a relief from it, in section 2 of your paper (eg. if section 1 includes tense, invaded, drowning, etc, then section 2 might include relaxed, released, floating etc).
  - d) Use your new list of words from (c) to inspire a new verse for the poem. Your verse should begin with one of the lines from the poem's final verse (eg. *When tsunamis subside / When wild dogs nap / When hurricanes abate / When soldiers take leave*) depending on which verse you chose to work with. Write your new verse in section 3 of your paper.

Eg. *When soldiers take leave  
I'm free to walk to my own sweet beat.  
As I tap my feet, tight laces release.*
  - e) Take a few moments to look over the three sections of your paper and reflect on how you felt as you were working on each of the sections. How easy or difficult did you find it to 'feel into' different moods or emotions, ones that may have been different to how you were feeling at the time? How do each of the three sections make you feel now, as you re-read them?
3. Music can have a powerful effect on our moods. Create a short playlist (3-5 songs) inspired by the verse you worked with in question 2. You can choose songs that reflect any or all of the sections of your paper – totally your call.

### In a classroom setting

- Question 1 lends itself to a viewing of the film followed by a short group discussion.
- Question 2 is designed as a personal exercise. Teachers can talk students through each part of the exercise in turn, and give a set time for each part. Students could then be invited to share their work in an impromptu 'gallery' by pinning up their papers, if they choose to. Question 2(e) could be discussed in pairs or small groups, or as part of a whole class feedback session.
- Question 3 could perhaps be set as a homework exercise, with students invited to share their playlists in a subsequent session (if they choose to). Students could work on this individually or in pairs.

## Poem 2: 'Angus Is a No-Show'

Depression | Low self-esteem | Withdrawal

Begin by allowing participants to read the poem quietly to themselves. Then invite one or two people to read the poem aloud, so you can hear it in different voices.

### Exploring the poem in a therapeutic, classroom, community or family setting

- The poem is written in a form called a pantoum (pronounced *pan-tomb*), which begins and ends with the same line and has a pattern of repeating the second and fourth lines of each verse, which become the first and third lines of the next.
  - What might be the purpose of using this form?
  - How does the form work with the content to create the poem's overall effect?
  - What do you think of the poem's title?
- What are the 'shadows looming up ahead' that Angus dreads?
- Why do you think that Angus
  - 'blocks emotion' and 'plugs the urge to weep'?
  - replies 'maybe' to invitations and then doesn't show?
  - 'resists constructive habits' and 'quits before he's started'?
  - shuns compassion?
  - feels guilt rather than self-kindness?
- How do you think Angus feels about himself? How might this affect his experience of 'the shadows', and also how he responds to them?
- How would you feel if you overheard someone telling Angus that he's his own worst enemy and he should take more constructive steps to help himself? Do you think it's always possible to take certain steps when our mental health falters? Why / why not?
- Imagine that you're Angus' friend (or sibling, parent, teacher, etc) and you've noticed his withdrawal. You suspect that he might be struggling and you're very concerned. How could you reach out to him, knowing that he's likely to reject your presence and support?

#### ANGUS IS A NO-SHOW

I dread the shadows looming up ahead  
and seek escape by sinking into sleep.  
Immobilise myself. Lie down. Play dead  
and block emotion. Plug the urge to weep.

I seek escape by sinking into sleep  
and hide in the familiar. Crouch. Lay low.  
I block emotion, plug the urge to weep.  
An invitation? Maybe. Never show.

just hide in the familiar. Crouch. Lay low  
and quit before I've started. Curl up small.  
Invitations? Maybe. Then don't show,  
just sit around and cower, shrink and crawl.

I quit before I've started, curl up small.  
Resist constructive habits to the hilt.  
I sit around and cower. Shrink and crawl,  
with all self-kindness nullified by guilt.

Resisting helpful habits to the hilt  
I snub compassion, push my friends away.  
With all self-kindness overturned by guilt  
I fade to ever darker shades of grey.

I shun compassion. Keep my friends at bay.  
Immobilise myself. Lie down. Play dead,  
a hostage of the endless shades of grey.  
I dread the shadows looming up ahead.

*Shauna Darling Robertson. You Are Not Alone. Troika, 2023.*

#### Some suggestions for a classroom setting

- Questions 1 & 2 could take the form of a short class discussion, as a 'warm up' for the more reflective questions that follow.
- Students could be asked to pair up or form small groups to discuss each of questions 3-5 in turn. Pairs or groups could then share their responses with the wider class via verbal feedback.

- Question 6 could be tackled as a group brainstorming or role-play-debate exercise. For example, the class could be divided into several groups representing different parties eg. a group of Anguses, a group of Angus' friends, one of his siblings, his parents, teachers, etc (each of which could opt to take various approaches, some more supportive than others). You could also have a group that represents the voice of 'the shadows'. Begin by allowing each group to discuss amongst themselves how they might approach Angus (and, for those playing Angus and the shadows, how he and they might respond to various possible approaches). Then, open the room to a whole class role-play-debate, in which students from the different groups propose their various approaches, and everyone else responds in the voice of their particular group. Teachers can steer the discussion, which will hopefully become quite lively, to encourage students to explore as many different approaches as possible, to consider the pros and cons of each, and explore how each one might help or not.

## Extension activities

1. Imagine you have a box, in which you're going to put 5-10 items to send to Angus. This box of items will be his 'emergency kit' for when the 'shadows loom up ahead'. What will you put into the box? Write your items on postcard-sized squares of paper or card, and add some artwork too (draw, paint, collage, cartoon – your call).

*For example: The world's softest duvet, for comfort.*

*A 200-Watt bulb, to shine the brightest light.*

*Roller-skates, for speedy escapes.*

*A boomerang of compassion that always comes back.*

*Warm rain to wash away cold, hard feelings.*

*An axe to swing, to feel like a warrior.*

You might like to find a box to put your items in and keep it for days when you may need it. Or, you could offer it to a friend in need.

2. Imagine that you're Angus. You decide to write a letter to the shadows, telling them whatever you want to tell them and asking them whatever you want to know. Your letter might be angry and blaming. Or, it might calmly tell the shadows how they make you feel. It might ask for something to change. Then again, it might be curious and try to find out more about the shadows and what they want from you. Perhaps it will be all of these things, or something else – this is *your* letter. When you've finished, read over the letter to yourself. Then, sit quietly for a short while and see if any replies from the shadows come to mind. If they do, write these down too. If you like, you can use these notes to create a poem, a short story or a song lyric.

### *In a classroom setting*

- Question 1 could be an individual in-class exercise, or started in-class and completed as a homework assignment. Students could then be invited to bring in their 5-10 items, which could be shared with the class as a 'gallery'. Afterwards, the teacher could gather students' items and randomly collate them into 'emergency kits', which could then be given out, one per student, to keep.
- Question 2 could lend itself to an individual, in-class, writing exercise, followed by an invitation (voluntary) to students to read out a few lines from their letters to the class. Or, students could write selected lines from their letters on Post-it notes, and then work together (or in groups) to arrange them into a collective, whole class (or group) poem.

### Poem 3: 'Because I Broke'

Possible themes: Depression | Breakdown | Overwhelm | Recovery

**BECAUSE I BROKE**  
*after Jenny Joseph*

(Down)

The sun was strangled by the sky  
because I broke  
and the moon suffocated the stars.

The mountains cast shadows across the valleys  
because I broke  
and the woods hummed with a hollow moan  
as the rivers burst their banks  
with the grief of the world which  
because I broke  
was no longer needed.

The shops pulled down their shutters, nailed up signs –  
broke.  
Way out west all the cowboys dismounted,  
the whole game up now because I broke.

(Through)

Today when the sun rises, it means it,  
because I broke  
and shoots burst up thirsty from the ground.

So what if the waters are still glacial?  
Because I broke  
I am now my own wetsuit  
and possess all the know-how needed to remake myself  
as polar bear or seal.  
Because I broke  
I can dive / drink / float anywhere.

The people in the streets avoid each other's eyes.  
I broke  
and so I gaze unfazed into all of their souls,  
stark naked with compassion because I broke.

*Shauna Darling Robertson. You Are Not Alone. Troika, 2023.*

Begin by allowing participants to read the poem quietly to themselves. Then invite one or two people to read the poem aloud, so you can hear it in different voices.

### Exploring the poem in a therapeutic, classroom, community or family setting

1. What does the phrase 'I broke' suggest to you? What kinds of experiences might the poem be exploring?
2. The poem presents two very different perspectives on 'breaking'. What comes to mind when you hear each of the terms 'break down' and 'break through'? How does each term feel to you?
3. Consider some of the images in the poem and what they mean to you:
  - a. Why might 'the sun strangle the sky' and 'the moon suffocate the stars'?
  - b. Why was 'the world no longer needed'? The 'whole game up'?
  - c. Why, today, does the rising sun really 'mean it'? Why do shoots 'burst up thirsty' from the ground?
  - d. Why does it no longer matter if 'the waters are still glacial'?
  - e. What might 'being my own wetsuit' feel like?
  - f. What do you understand by possessing 'all the know-how needed to remake myself' and being able to 'dive / drink / float anywhere'?
  - g. Why might someone who 'broke' now 'gaze unfazed' and feel 'stark naked with compassion'?
4. How do you think the person in the poem might have been able to move from 'down' to 'through'? What might have shifted for them, or helped them? See how many different possibilities you can think of.

5. If the person in the poem could go back in time and edit their past so they didn't 'break', do you think they would do it? Why / why not?
6. Is it really possible for a person to 'break'?

### *Some suggestions for a classroom setting*

- Questions 1 & 2 could be structured as a whole group discussion, with students' verbal responses captured and summarised by the teacher (whiteboard, flip-chart, IWB, etc). Question 2 could be explored as a word association exercise, with responses captured in a visual format such as a mind map or an interactive online poll (eg. [www.mentimeter.com](http://www.mentimeter.com)).
- Students could be asked to pair up or form small groups to discuss question 3. Responses to each of parts (a)-(g) could then be shared and discussed with the whole group in a feedback session guided by the teacher.
- Question 4 could also be tackled in breakout groups. Each group could note their responses on Post-It notes (one response per note). The whole group could then reconvene and review their collective responses by sticking all of the notes to a wall, perhaps grouping them by emerging themes.
- Questions 5 & 6 could each begin with a simple yes / no vote by way of a show of hands, followed by a group discussion of the reasons behind students' choices.

### **Extension activities**

1. Take two sheets of paper and title one 'Because I broke down...' and the other 'Because I broke through...'. Take the first sheet ('down'), set a timer for 3 minutes, and write a list of whatever comes to mind in response to the heading. Keep writing continuously, don't stop to think or to read or edit what you've written. Then do the same thing for the second sheet ('through').
2. Use your notes from question 1 to create something: a poem, a short piece of prose, a graphic meme, a piece of artwork, a song, etc – it's entirely up to you.
3. Create a playlist of 3-5 songs that you feel could help you move from 'down' to 'through'.

### *In a classroom setting*

- Question 1 lends itself to an in-class individual writing exercise. Teachers can set up the exercise and manage the timer, encouraging students to write freely whatever comes to mind without worrying about writing something 'good' or that 'makes sense'.
  - Questions 2 & 3 could then be set as homework exercises, with students invited to share their creations and playlists with the class in a subsequent session.
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## Additional resources

Some other poems in *You Are Not Alone* that could be used to explore themes related to depression include:

- ‘Ominous Sky’ – exploring the metaphor of a ‘black cloud’.
- ‘How Have You Been Feeling Lately?’ and ‘Jamal Wishes He Could Explain It’ – on the difficulty of understanding or explaining how we feel at times.
- ‘How To Grow Your Pain’ – what can happen when we try to avoid our feelings.
- ‘Melissa, Tuesday’ – on changeable moods.
- ‘Infobesity’ – on overload, burnout.

## Exploring the topic further

Most people can find themselves feeling down or in a low mood at times, whether in response to an unwanted event or experience, or for no specific reason they’re aware of. Some people also struggle with mental health conditions such as depression or bipolar disorder. You can find out more at [www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/depression](http://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/depression)

You may wish to draw on some of the resources that are available online from various mental health charities and organisations. Some of these are listed below (note: you’ll need to copy and paste some of the longer URLs into your browser).

[www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/depression](http://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/depression)

[www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/depression/about-depression](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/depression/about-depression)

[www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/mental-health-conditions/depression](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/mental-health-conditions/depression)

[www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/mental-health-conditions/bipolar-disorder](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/mental-health-conditions/bipolar-disorder)

[mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/mental-health-needs/low-mood-or-depression/low-mood-or-depression](http://mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/mental-health-needs/low-mood-or-depression/low-mood-or-depression)

[www.depressionuk.org](http://www.depressionuk.org)

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This resource was written by Shauna Darling Robertson.  
Based on a format by Dr Pooky Knightsmith in her book *Using Poetry to Promote Talking and Healing* (Jessica Kingsley, 2016: [www.pookyknightsmith.com/books](http://www.pookyknightsmith.com/books)).  
With input from Trevor Millum, poet, educationalist and co-author (with Bernard Young) of *The Poetry Guide* (Troika, 2020: [www.troikabooks.com/the-poetry-guide](http://www.troikabooks.com/the-poetry-guide)).