LEARN TO LIFT YOUR MOOD

COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES (CAPS)

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY
It’s normal to feel down or sad at times. If you have had to cope with a stressful event, lost someone you love or something that was very important to you, life may lose some of its meaning, at least for a short while.

This usually passes, but for some people sadness can become a more significant mental health problem referred to as ‘depression’.

Whether you’re experiencing normal sadness or a mental health condition like depression, there are many things that can help you to return to a life that is more meaningful and fulfilling.

This eBook has been designed to inform you about low mood and depression and to introduce you to one of the most effective approaches for managing it: ‘behavioural activation’.
WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

The word depression is often used to describe the ordinary feelings of sadness we all experience from time to time in response to the natural stresses and strains of living. For this reason it is important to distinguish ordinary feelings of sadness from the mental health disorder known as “clinical depression”.

Clinical depression is more than just feeling upset or sad. It’s a serious and potentially very debilitating mental health condition involving a range of symptoms that persistently affect mood, thinking, appetite, sleep, and behaviour, often to such a degree that everyday functioning is severely impaired.

If you’re interested in finding out more about depression The Youth Beyond Blue and main Beyond Blue websites are worth checking out. They have a wide range of information and resources about depression to help you understand it better, consider whether you may be experiencing it, and point you towards the right kinds of help.

Another good starting point is listening to some stories of people who have suffered with depression and found ways to recover – you may identify with some of their experiences and you may also then discover some all-important hope that things can get better with the right types of action and support.
People experiencing depression may have suicidal thoughts. If you feel like this, it is particularly important you seek help. Take a look at our information and advice pages about suicidal thinking, for more about how to get support to stay safe.

Whether you’ve decided to seek professional help or not, this eBook is a great starting place for beginning to learn to manage low mood. We will now take a closer look at why and how making changes in daily behaviour can be a fast and powerful way of bringing about some improvements in mood.

The symptoms of depression can cause some drastic changes in daily routines and behaviour. These changes can then make depression worse and play a big part in blocking someone from getting better.

A common example of this is the impact of depressive symptoms like reduced motivation and energy. If you experience these symptoms you may begin to cut back on activities, neglect daily tasks, responsibilities, and withdraw from the people you usually enjoy spending time with. This kind of makes sense because you really don’t feel up to doing these things like you normally would.

But here’s the problem. When activity levels decrease you become even less motivated and even more tired. When you stop doing the things that you value and enjoy, you don’t get access to those usual feelings of pleasure and reward. When you cut yourself off from people because you don’t feel up to seeing them or you think they don’t want to see you, you miss out on the fulfillment of connecting with others and end up feeling lonely. And when you neglect your daily tasks and responsibilities you begin to feel overwhelmed by the pile of things you’ve been putting off.

All of this makes you feel worse and even less like doing those valuable things. Before you know it you’re caught in the depression loop.

The good news is that there are some straightforward, effective ways to begin making your way out of this loop. Read on to find out how.
Put simply, this is all about increasing your activity levels to promote fun and achievement - the two key feelings that offer some relief from feeling depressed. More fun is attained by increasing the amount of time spent doing pleasurable activities, while tackling your ‘to-do list’ in a more realistic and do-able way brings a sense of achievement.

In these ways, getting more active helps you feel better, giving you some important respite from those dark, low feelings and a way to break out of the depression loop. But there are other benefits:

- **Activity helps you to feel less tired.** When you’re physically tired you need rest. When you’re depressed the opposite is generally true. Sleeping more and sitting around doing nothing makes you more lethargic and creates more space for your mind to ruminate on depressing thoughts, making you feel even more depressed.

- **Activity helps you to feel more in control of your life.** If you can find ways to just get going with your tasks you will soon being to get a sense of momentum and reward that gives you the confidence to do more.

- **Activity helps you think more clearly.** Once you get started, you may find you take different perspectives on the specific problems in your life. Your mind can also feel clearer once you have some different things to focus your attention on in terms of increased activities.

Though there are a number of advantages to getting more active, it doesn’t mean it’s easy to get started. If it was, you would have started already! When you are depressed, things you can usually do without even having to think about them can seem like they need a huge effort. The barrier is often negative thoughts telling you things like “I won’t enjoy this”, “this is too difficult” or “I’ll probably fail just like I do at everything else”.

So this is why it’s important to start small and build up gradually. It’s as though you’re training for a marathon after having been out for while with an injury. You wouldn’t just go run the marathon without any training! And when you start your training schedule again, you’d probably start with shorter, more manageable runs and build your strength and fitness up gradually.

It’s the same with increasing activities when you feel depressed. The most important thing is to get moving, so initially set goals that are small and achievable. Don’t expect to be able to clean the whole house in one go or be the life and soul of the party immediately – you’re not race-fit yet!

With these benefits of increased activity in mind, and with a spirit of starting small and building up gradually, let’s now look at the 4 key steps in behavioural activation:

1. **INCREASE FUN ACTIVITIES**
   - Make as long a list as you can of activities that you enjoy and find meaningful
   - In doing this, consider activities you can do at home, outdoors, with others, alone, those that are relaxing as well as those that are more physical
   - Have a think back to times in your life when you were not depressed – what kinds of activities were you doing then?

2. **GET GOING WITH TASKS**
   - Start by making a list of the various things you need to do. This can be daunting, that’s why you’ve been avoiding it! But consider that all those tasks are floating around in your head anyway, creating noise and stress, and because you can’t see them all they probably seem even more overwhelming than they actually are! So, take a chance and experiment with writing them all down – this is the first step in getting back in the driving seat.
   - Plan when you are going to do your fun activities by scheduling them (Step 3)

3. **GET ORGANIZED**
   - What did you used to enjoy doing that you haven’t done for a long time?
   - If you can identify activities but there are barriers, try using the problem-solving approach in the next step
   - Struggling for ideas?
   - Plan when you are going to do your fun activities by scheduling them (Step 3)

   **Task List Template**
   - Wherever you can, break a task down into smaller steps. This can help you to see more clearly what you need to do in order to achieve your goal and make it easier to see some progress.
   - If you encounter barriers with a task, try some structured problem-solving to help you generate and execute strategies for dealing with the barriers.
   - Use a schedule (Step 3) to make an agreement with yourself about when you are going to do each task
   - When any task or step is completed make sure you cross it off your list – this can be really satisfying! And that helps with motivation for the next task.
Having some method and structure to increasing your activities can help with commitment and motivation, and help you to keep track of what you’re going to do and when. It can also provide a bit of hope and pleasure when you can see what you have to look forward to in the week ahead.

- You could use a diary, or an application on your computer or mobile phone.
- If you prefer to write things down here are a selection of weekly schedule templates that could be useful.
- Start by booking in those activities that are already set – e.g. work or Uni lectures.
- Then around these try to book in a balance of pleasurable and task-oriented activities each day.
- Remember to start small and build up gradually – the key initially is to just get moving.
- Check out our skillshop and eBook for further help with getting organised in relation to Uni.

4. MONITOR YOUR MOOD

- People who are depressed generally predict low levels of enjoyment and achievement ahead of actually trying an activity. This can be enough to dissuade them from even trying. However, if they do manage to act they usually find they get more out of it than they expected. So, by monitoring your mood as you increase activities you will hopefully discover that activity has a positive impact on your low mood, and results in a greater sense of pleasure and achievement than you expected.

- Monitoring is most best done with a structured approach – use this worksheet to make your behavioural activation even more effective.
- If, through monitoring, you find your mood is improving you will be motivated to continue re-engaging with your life. Such re-engagement is exactly what is needed to help you get out of the depression loop.

Negative thinking is a hallmark symptom of depression and this may most commonly show up as distressing thoughts about yourself (e.g. “I’m such a failure”, “I’m never fun to be around”), other people (e.g. “people are mean”, “no-one’s interested in what I have to say”) and the future (e.g. “I’m always going to feel like this”, “no-one will ever love me”).

Getting active is the focus of this e-books here and is a great way to begin dealing with low mood and depression. If you also find that you need assistance with handling your negative thoughts the workbooks from the Centre for Clinical Interventions will help you to identify and re-evaluate your negative thoughts. You could also attend the Manage Your Thoughts skillshop at CAPS.

Alternatively you can also learn to develop defusion and mindfulness skills. Mindfulness involves learning to notice what is happening moment by moment with a non-judging attitude. Practicing mindfulness helps us to “step back” from unhelpful or anxiety producing thoughts and feelings. If we can step back from strong thoughts, feelings and urges we can avoid being caught up by them and swept away into unhelpful actions. For a guided mindfulness exercise see above. You could also attend a mindfulness training at CAPS.
OTHER USEFUL LINKS AND RESOURCES

Check out this workbook on Behavioural Strategies for Managing Depression from the Centre for Clinical Interventions, which is part of their free, online Back from the Bluez program.

Take a look at some of the skillshops, groups and eBooks offered by CAPS, many of which offer additional ways of managing difficulties with low mood and depression.

INDIVIDUAL ASSISTANCE

If after accessing all of the resources on our website you are still needing some further help in learning skills to manage low mood and depression, or are concerned about symptoms you are experiencing, please make an appointment with one of the counsellors at the CAPS or see a GP, who can provide assessment and referral to resources in your local area.