

Tackling low mood and depression

BACKGROUND

Low mood and depression are really common. Between one in four and one in five people experience significantly low mood at some time in their life - so you're not alone.

Sometimes the symptoms are short-term and we work them out over time- but sometimes we can feel stuck so that we feel down and stop enjoying things for a number of weeks, months – or even longer. When we get stuck in a period of low mood or depression it can affect different areas of our lives and it can be hard to know what to do to improve things. So perhaps we can't sleep, we feel low, our confidence is gone, we feel stressed out – or off our food and feel like pushing people away. These are just some of the ways low mood can affect us.

So, what we need is a way of breaking things down and working out how to change things. Here is a typical example of someone experiencing and tackling low mood. Dave had a job he really enjoyed but when job uncertainties hit, there were redundancies and he lost his job. He has now been feeling low for 3 months and has recently told his GP how he feels. His doctor was very helpful and helped Dave understand how all his symptoms fitted together and were affecting him.

To do this, his Dr asked him about how he was feeling in five key areas of his life. The aim of this so-called five areas assessment is to help Dave to understand his situation better - and to spur him on to make some small changes that can have a big impact on how he feels.

1). The first of the five areas is the *People and events around us*. Dave has lots of things going on around him that are causes of pressure. He's:

- Lost his job.
- Feels he hasn't got enough money to get through the month.
- And also since losing his job he's stopped seeing his friends as much and feels lonely.

Hopefully that gives you an idea of the sorts of things that can go wrong around us.

2). Let's move on to look at the second of the five areas – Dave's *Altered thinking*.

For the past 3 months, on and off, he has been saying to himself:

'Could I have done more or worked harder?', *'What if I don't find a new job?'*, *'I'm too embarrassed to tell my friends that I've been made redundant.'* *'I shouldn't feel like this, I should be strong and confident.'*

Unhelpful thoughts that are common in depression include self-critical things, blaming ourselves for things that aren't really our fault and worrying that others judge us badly. These are all **unhelpful thoughts**. They often aren't true- but also dwelling on them makes you feel worse.

3). And that leads us on to the third area: called *Altered feelings*. Have you noticed that what we think can affect how we feel emotionally?

Because Dave's mind is full of so many negative and self-critical thoughts, he feels worse emotionally. He feels down, guilty, fed up, angry and stressed.

He also notices one of the key symptoms seen in low mood- life stops feeling enjoyable.

4). And how we feel can affect us physically - that is Area 4- altered physical feelings or sensations.

People are often surprised quite how physically exhausting low mood can be. His low mood leaves Dave feeling physically exhausted. He also isn't feeling hungry anymore and has lost some weight. He is tired and feels run down. He also aches all over and has headaches. Other physical sensations can include: feeling sick, palpitations, pain, losing your sex drive and noticing a churning stomach.

5). And all these things- the altered thoughts, feelings and physical symptoms all add up – to affect what Dave does – his *Altered behaviour and activity levels*. This is the fifth and final area of the five areas assessment.

All these areas affect each other, and can create a vicious cycle. The worse Dave feels, the less he does. And the less he does, the worse he feels. He starts to stop looking for jobs and stays inside much of the day. Because he feels guilty that he hasn't got a job, he has stopped visiting his family. Finally, Dave avoids phone calls from his friends and is cutting himself off from another possible source of support. The good news is that this vicious cycle can spin both ways, and by making a positive change in one area, things may change for the better in the others too.

For example, Dave and his GP both agreed that his altered behaviour is a good place to start making changes. As a small first step, Dave decides to say Yes to an invitation to go to his friend's for Sunday lunch. He also decides he will start speaking to his friends and family on the phone again – and will really listen to how they are. He also cooks himself a meal – and really enjoys it.

He does all these bit by bit over a few days so the activities are realistic, small and achievable. Dave had a great day at the lunch then came home and chatted to his family to tell them about it.

HOW CAN I APPLY THIS TO MY LIFE?

Did this help you understand how you are feeling right now? Why not work through your own five areas assessment and see if there are any changes you can make to help yourself feel better. Writing this down is a good idea.

1. *What is going on in your life- are there any pressures or problems?*
2. *What has been going through your mind recently? Any thoughts, memories, pictures or predictions about what will happen in future?*
3. *How does this make you feel emotionally? Low/sad, anxious, guilty, ashamed? Angry?*
4. *Have you noticed you have been feeling different physically?*
5. *Have you stopped doing things you used to enjoy? Avoiding anything? Have you started doing new things that are becoming unhelpful? And what impact has this altered activity had on how you are feeling?*

Are you trapped in a vicious cycle- if so – here's how to get out.

1. Thinking - Watch out for upsetting thoughts that worsen how you feel emotionally or physically- or affect what you do. These are often just a thinking habit rather than being actually true. So, sometimes just noticing the pattern will help you step back and change things. There's more about this in the *Why does everything always go wrong* unhelpful thinking session of the Living Life to the Full course.

2. Physical symptoms –if you notice new symptoms that concern you, get them checked out by your doctor to find out what is happening. If low mood or stress is worsening things, try our *Tension Control Training* and learn key skills in how to relax your body and mind.

3. Behaviour – Getting going again is one of the best things you can do. Plan in things that give you a sense of achievement, pleasure and closeness to others. And make sure you re-establish a structure to your day by getting up and going to bed at a reasonable time. And eat three reasonable meals a day.

And **Say Yes!** Negative thoughts typically tell you to say no - and decline invitations. So, watch out for saying no to things - or avoiding things because you feel scared - because the more you avoid things the more it saps your confidence and that vicious cycle starts spinning again

And here are **Some don'ts**:

Don't drink too much, or eat too much to block how you feel, or push people away, or hide away or isolate yourself.

Making changes can really help boost your mood and help you feel better, which in turn will really help you tackle whatever life is throwing at you.

Further Content

Why do I feel so bad book and module.

I can't be bothered doing anything book and module.

Why does everything always go wrong book and worksheet.

How to fix almost everything book and module.

Vicious cycle worksheet.

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