

Information Sheet

Lifting Low Mood

When people feel low, often the temptation is to let their mood get the upper hand. But it does not have to be this way! There are two main ways of lifting low mood: the first focusses on increasing your activity level and the second involves changes in thinking.

The Importance of Activity

Low mood creates a cycle: it depletes energy levels and reduces motivation, resulting in the tendency to do less, which then negatively affects feelings of enjoyment and achievement, ultimately prolonging and deepening the low mood. In order to break this cycle, it is important to be active when feeling down.

The last thing most people want when they lack energy and motivation is to get up and do something! But research shows that trying to stay active and contribute to daily tasks often increases feelings of motivation, accomplishment, self-confidence and pleasure in activities. The main challenges when trying to be active during a low mood are starting an activity, knowing where to start and trying not to do too many things at once.

To reduce the potential of becoming overwhelmed, the easiest way to start is to take small steps and slowly build to bigger jobs. Some examples of small tasks that you could try are: showering and brushing your teeth, tidying part of a room, reading a book for a short time, making something delicious to eat, catching up with someone whose company you enjoy, or even just sitting outside and absorbing the natural surrounds. It's useful if the activities are a mix of tasks which are enjoyable and tasks which bring some level of achievement. Starting with small activities will slowly increase your motivation, feelings of self-confidence and - most importantly - will start to lift your mood.

Unhelpful Thinking

Usually low mood is accompanied by automatic, unhelpful thoughts or self-criticisms (e.g., "Why can't anything ever go right for me?"; "I have no reason to feel this way, what's wrong with me?"; "I'm not good enough"), which further add to feeling low. Unhelpful thinking associated with low mood often involves looking at the negative aspects of ourselves or a situation and filtering out the positives. It is natural to occasionally engage this type of thinking, but it becomes a problem when we use it all the time. The best way to address unhelpful thinking is firstly to recognise that you are dwelling on unhelpful thoughts and then challenge the thoughts. It will be helpful to write down what is going through your mind at the time you feel low. Once you have identified the unhelpful automatic thoughts, the next step is to challenge them. Ask yourself "What other possible explanations could there be?" or "How might someone else view this situation?" or "How much will this matter in five years?" Once you start to challenge these thoughts, you can begin to distance yourself from them and see things in a different, more helpful way.

Although there are many other factors that contribute to low mood, taking these small steps towards activity and changing unhelpful thinking can help prevent low mood from becoming depression.

It's important to remember that low mood and sadness are normal human emotions and we all feel low at times! A low mood becomes problematic when it is persistent, becomes extreme or leads to thoughts about self-harm or suicide. If you feel like this, you could be suffering from depression and should see your GP.