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For Matthew.

If mine is the ink then yours is the paper. Like all our
adventures we got here together.

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Introduction

I'm sitting in my therapy room across from a young woman. She is relaxed in the chair, her arms open and loosely moving as she speaks to me. A transformation from the tension and nerves of her first session. We have only had a dozen appointments. She looks into my eyes and starts to nod and smile as she says, 'You know what? I know it's going to be hard, but I know I can do it.'

My eyes sting and I swallow. The smile sweeps across every muscle in my face. She has felt the shift and, now, so have I. She came into this room, some time ago, fearful of the world and everything she had to face. Pervasive self-doubt led her to feel dread for every new change and challenge. She left therapy that day with her head held a little higher. Not because of me. I have no magical ability to heal anyone or change their life. She had not needed years of therapy that unravelled her childhood. In this situation, as in many others, the major part of my role was as an educator. I passed on insights about what the science says and what has worked for others. Once she understood and started using the concepts and skills, a transformation began. She felt hope for the future. She started to believe in her own strength. She started dealing with difficult situations in healthy new ways. Each time she did, confidence in her ability to cope grew a bit more.

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As we revisited the things she needed to remember in order to face the week ahead, she nodded, looked at me and asked, 'Why has nobody told me this before?'

Those words stayed with me, ringing in my head. She was not the first or the last person to say them. The same scenario repeated itself over and over. Individuals were coming along to therapy believing that their strong painful emotions were the result of a fault in their brain or personality. They did not believe they had any power to influence them. While longer-term, more in-depth therapy is appropriate for some people, there were so many who simply needed some education about how their mind and body work and how they could manage their mental health day-to-day.

I knew the catalyst was not me, it was the knowledge they were being introduced to. But people should not have to pay to come and see someone like me just to get access to that education about how their mind works. Sure, the information is out there. But in a sea of misinformation, you have to know what you are looking for.

I started campaigning into my poor husband's ear about how things should be different. 'OK, go for it,' he said. 'Put some videos on YouTube or something.'

So we did. Together we started making videos talking about mental health. As it turned out, I was not the only one who wanted to talk about this stuff. Before I knew it, I was making almost daily videos for millions of followers across social media. But the platforms where I could reach the most people seemed to be those with short-form videos. This means I have a large collection of videos with no longer than 60 seconds to get my point across.

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While I have been able to catch people's attention, share some insights and get them talking about mental health, I still want to go one step further. When you make a 60-second video there is so much that you have to leave out. So much detail that gets missed. So, here it is. The detail. The ins and outs of how I might explain some of these concepts in a therapy session and some simple guidance on how to use them, step by step.

The tools in this book are mostly taught in therapy, but they are not therapy skills. They are life skills. Tools that can help every single one of us to navigate through difficult times and to flourish.

In this book, I will break down the things I have learned as a psychologist and gather together all of the most valuable knowledge, wisdom and practical techniques I have come across that have changed my life and those of the people I have worked with. This is the place to get clarity on emotional experience and a clear idea of what to do about it.

When we understand a little about how our minds work and we have some guideposts on how to deal with our emotions in a healthy way, we not only build resilience, but we can thrive and, over time, find a sense of growth.

Before leaving their first therapy session, many people want some sort of tool they can take home and start using to ease their distress. For this reason, this book is not about delving into your childhood and working out how or why you came to struggle. There are other great books for that. But, in therapy, before we can expect anyone to work on healing any past

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traumas, we must ensure they have the tools in place to build resilience and the ability to tolerate distressing emotions safely. There is such power in understanding the many ways you can influence how you feel and nurture good mental health.

This book is all about doing just that.

This book is not therapy, in the same way that a book about how to maximize your physical health is not medicine. It is a toolbox filled to the brim with different tools for different jobs. You cannot master how to use them all at the same time, so you don't need to try. Pick the section that fits with the challenges you face right now, and spend time applying those ideas. Every skill takes time to become effective, so give it a chance and plenty of repetition before you discard any of the tools. You cannot build a house with just one tool. Each task requires something slightly different. And however skilled you get at using those tools, some challenges are just much harder than others.

To me, working on maximizing our mental health is no different to working on our physical health. If you put health on a number scale with zero as neutral – not unwell but not thriving – a number below zero would indicate a health problem and any number above zero would indicate good health. In the last few decades it has become acceptable and even fashionable to work on maximizing your physical health through nutrition and exercise. Only more recently has it become acceptable to openly and visibly work on your mental health. This means you don't need to wait until you're struggling before you pick up this

book, because it is OK to build upon your mental health and resilience, even if you are not unwell or struggling right now. When you feed your body with good nutrition and build up stamina and strength with regular exercise, you know that your body is more able to fight infection and heal when faced with injury. It's just the same with mental health. The more work we do on building self-awareness and resilience when all is well, the better able we are to face life's challenges when they come our way.

If you pick a skill from this book and find it useful, in hard times don't stop practising that skill when everything starts to improve. Even when you are feeling good and don't think you need it, these skills are nutrition for your mind. It's like paying a mortgage rather than rent. You are investing in your future health.

The things included in this book have a research evidence base. But I do not rest on that alone. I also know they can help because I have seen them help, time and time again, for real people. There is hope. With some guidance and self-awareness, struggle can build strength.

When you start to share things on social media or you write a self-help book, lots of people get the impression that you have it all sorted. I have seen a lot of authors in the self-help industry perpetuate this idea. They feel they have to look as if the things life throws at them leave no dents or scars. They suggest that their book contains the answers – all the answers you will ever need in life. Let me demystify that one right now.

I am a psychologist. That means I have read a lot of the

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research that has been produced on this subject and I have been trained to use it to help guide other people in their quest towards positive change. I am also a human. The tools I have acquired do not stop life throwing stuff at you. They help you to navigate, swerve, take a hit and get back up. They don't stop you getting lost along the way. They help you to notice when you have lost your way and bravely turn on your heel and head back towards a life that feels meaningful and purposeful to you. This book is not the key to a problem-free life. It is a great bunch of tools that helps me and many others find our way through.

The journey so far . . .

I am not a guru who has all the answers to the universe. This book is part journal, part guide. In some ways I have always been on a personal quest to discover how it all pieces together. So this book is me making use of all those hours spent reading, writing and speaking with real humans in therapy to understand a bit more about being human and what helps us while we are here. This is only the journey so far. I continue to learn and be amazed by people I meet. Scientists keep asking better questions and discovering better answers. So here is my collection of the most important things I have learned *so far* that have helped both me and the people I work with in therapy to find our way through human struggle.

So this book is not necessarily going to ensure that you live

the rest of your days with a smile on your face. It will let you know which tools you can use to make sure that when you do smile, it is because you genuinely feel something. It will describe the tools you need to keep re-evaluating and finding your direction, returning to healthier habits and self-awareness.

Tools might look great in the box. But they only help when you get them out and start practising how to use them. Each tool takes regular practice. If you miss the nail with the hammer this time, come back later and try again. As a fellow human being, I too continue to do this, and I have only included techniques and skills that I have tried and found useful both for myself and for the individuals I have worked with. This book is a resource for me as much as it is for you. I will keep returning to it time and time again whenever I feel I need to. My wish is that you will do the same and that it can be a toolbox for life.

Some brand-new extra chapters . . .

If you are wondering what this updated edition is all about and what new and extra chapters are included, let me explain. I have been overwhelmed by kind words of appreciation for the first edition of this book. While I remain grateful that the book has made a positive impact for so many, I didn't ever want to assume that it was enough or that it couldn't be improved. So I simply started asking the question. When people approached me to sign their copy filled with highlighter markings and post-it notes, and when they emailed to offer feedback, I wanted to

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know what they felt was missing. What had they wished was included but wasn't? Where had they needed more guidance? I quickly started to see a common theme in the answers, so I put the question out to my followers on Instagram. The overwhelming majority said that they wanted more guidance on how to get to work tackling anxiety day to day. Our world is not ideal, which means that many people are working on their anxiety without the help of a therapist. And even those who *are* working with a therapist can often benefit from extra support. With this in mind, I have created for you a practical step-by-step guide to tackling anxiety.

As this book continues to be bought around the world and people buy it for themselves and for their loved ones, I know it will be placed in the hands of readers who want the same things as the thousands of people who so kindly offered me their suggestions. I want those books to have the benefits of everything those previous readers say they loved, plus the addition of this new section.

I also noticed the large numbers of people that contact me to ask for advice on how to deal with panic attacks. I realized that many people who experience panic attacks have no idea what they are or how to respond to them. After the first experience of a panic attack, things can become much better or much worse very quickly, depending on what happens next. Having the right education and guidance as soon as possible can shift that trajectory towards wellness. So I have decided to add to this edition a personal guide for understanding and dealing with panic attacks. While it is no replacement for therapy, it

does cover lots of the educational material and exercises that you would work through with a psychologist like me.

So if you are holding this new updated edition of *Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?* it is because I managed to persuade my publisher to give you more. I asked what you needed more of; you told me and I listened. Then I got to work. The result is a guide to dealing with panic attacks and a personalized action plan for tackling anxiety in daily life. These sections include many of the insights that I talk about in therapy and many of the exercises that I work through with people in sessions. I've taken many of the concepts from the original section on anxiety and shown you the step-by-step method for how to turn it into action that helps you make progress.

If you haven't yet read the rest of the book, start with the section on anxiety (page 190), then move to the new action plan section (page 347). If you don't experience panic attacks, then of course you can skip that part. But if you do, that section is purposely placed before the anxiety plan, so work through them in order.

Whatever the struggles you face ahead, I hope that this guide and action plan can help you take your mental health into your own hands and start working towards the life that you want to create for yourself. If it can help just 10% then I consider my effort to write it worthwhile. But now I hand over to you. Change that is worth it always demands conscious effort, courage and persistence. You do not have to do it perfectly. You just have to keep going. I'll be thinking of you, so let me know how you get on.

1

On
Dark
Places

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CHAPTER 1

Understanding low mood

Everyone has low days.

Everyone.

But we all differ in how frequent the low days are and how severe the low mood.

Something that I have come to realize over the years of working as a psychologist is how much people struggle with low mood and never tell a soul. Their friends and family would never know. They mask it, push it away and focus on meeting expectations. Sometimes people arrive at therapy after years of doing that.

They feel like they're getting something wrong. They compare themselves to the people who appear to have it all together all of the time. The ones who are always smiling and apparently full of energy.

They buy into the idea that some people are just like that and happiness is some sort of personality type. You either have it or you don't.

On Dark Places

If we see low mood as purely a fault in the brain, we don't believe we can change it, so instead we get to work on hiding it. We go about the day, doing all the right things, smiling at all the right people, yet all the time feeling a bit empty and dragged down by that low mood, not enjoying things in the way we are told we should.

Take a moment to notice your body temperature. You might feel perfectly comfortable, or you may be too hot or too cold. While changes in how hot or cold you feel could be a sign of infection and illness, it could just as easily be a signal of things around you. Maybe you forgot your jacket, which is normally enough to protect you from the cold. Perhaps the sky has clouded over and it has started to rain. Maybe you are hungry or dehydrated. When you run for the bus you notice you warm up. Our body temperature is affected by our environment, both internal and external, and we also have the power to influence it ourselves. Mood is much the same. When we experience low mood, it may have been influenced by several factors from our internal and external world, but when we understand what those influences are, we can use that knowledge to shift it in the direction we want it to go. Sometimes the answer is to grab an extra layer and run for the bus. Sometimes it's something else.

Something that the science has been confirming to us, and something people often learn in therapy, is that we have more power to influence our emotions than we thought.

This means we get to start working on our own wellbeing and taking our emotional health into our own hands. It reminds

us that our mood is not fixed and it does not define who we are; it is a sensation we experience.

This doesn't mean we can eradicate low mood or depression. Life still presents us with hardship, pain and loss and that will always be reflected in our mental and physical health. Instead, it means we can build up a toolbox with things that help. The more we practise using those tools, the more skilled we get at using them. So when life throws us problems that hammer our mood into the ground we have something to turn to.

The concepts and skills covered are for us all. Research shows them to be helpful for those with depression, but they are not a controlled drug that you need a prescription for. They are life skills. Tools that we can all use as we go through life facing fluctuations in mood, big and small. For anyone who experiences severe and enduring mental illness it is always optimal to learn new skills with the support of a professional.

How feelings get created

Sleep is bliss. Then my alarm offends my ears. It's too loud and I hate that tune. It sends a shockwave through my body that I am not ready for. I press snooze and lie back down. My head is aching and I feel irritated. I press snooze again. If we don't get up soon the kids will be late for school. I need to get ready for my meeting. I close my eyes and see the to-do list lying on my desk in the office. Dread. Irritation. Exhaustion. I don't want to do today.

On Dark Places

Is this low mood? Did it come from my brain? How did I wake up like this? Let's trace back. Last night I stayed up late working. By the time I got into bed I was too tired to go back downstairs to grab a glass of water. Then my baby woke up twice in the night. I haven't slept enough and I'm dehydrated. The loud alarm woke me from a deep sleep, sending stress hormones shooting through my body as I woke up. My heart started pounding and that felt something like stress.

Each of these signals sends information to my brain. We are not OK. So my brain goes on a hunt for reasons why. It searches, it finds. So my physical discomfort, brought about by lack of sleep and dehydration, helped to create low mood.

Not all low mood is unidentified dehydration, but when dealing with mood it is essential to remember that it's not all in your head. It's also in your body state, your relationships, your past and present, your living conditions and lifestyle. It's in everything you do and don't do, in your diet and your thoughts, your movements and memories. How you feel is not simply a product of your brain.

Your brain is constantly working to make sense of what is going on. But it only has a certain number of clues to work from. It takes information from your body (e.g. heart rate, breathing, blood pressure, hormones). It takes information from each of your senses – what you can see, hear, touch, taste and smell. It takes information from your actions and thoughts. It pieces all these clues together with memories of when you have felt similar in the past and makes a suggestion, a best guess about what is happening and what you do about it. That guess can sometimes be felt as an emotion or a mood. The meaning we make of

that emotion and how we respond to it, in turn, sends information back to the body and the mind about what to do next (Feldman Barrett, 2017). So when it comes to changing your mood, the ingredients that go in will determine what comes out.

The two-way road

Lots of self-help books tell us to get our mindset right. They tell us, 'What you think will change how you feel.' But they often miss something crucial. It doesn't end there. The relationship works both ways. The way you feel also influences the types of thoughts that can pop into your head, making you more vulnerable to experiencing thoughts that are negative and self-critical. Even when we know our thought patterns aren't helping, it is so incredibly hard to think differently when we feel down, and even harder to follow the rule of 'only positive thoughts' that is often suggested on social media. The mere presence of those negative thoughts does not mean that they came first and caused the low mood. So thinking differently may not be the only answer.

How we think is not the whole picture. Everything we do and don't do influences our mood too. When you feel down, all you want to do is hide away. You don't feel like doing any of the things you normally enjoy, and so you don't. But disengaging from those things for too long makes you feel even worse. The loop also occurs with our physical state. Let's say you have been too busy to exercise for a few weeks. You feel tired and low in mood, so exercising is the last thing you want to do. The

longer you avoid the exercise, the more you feel lethargic and low on energy. When you are low on energy, the chance of exercising goes down, along with your mood. Low mood gives you the urge to do the things that make mood worse.

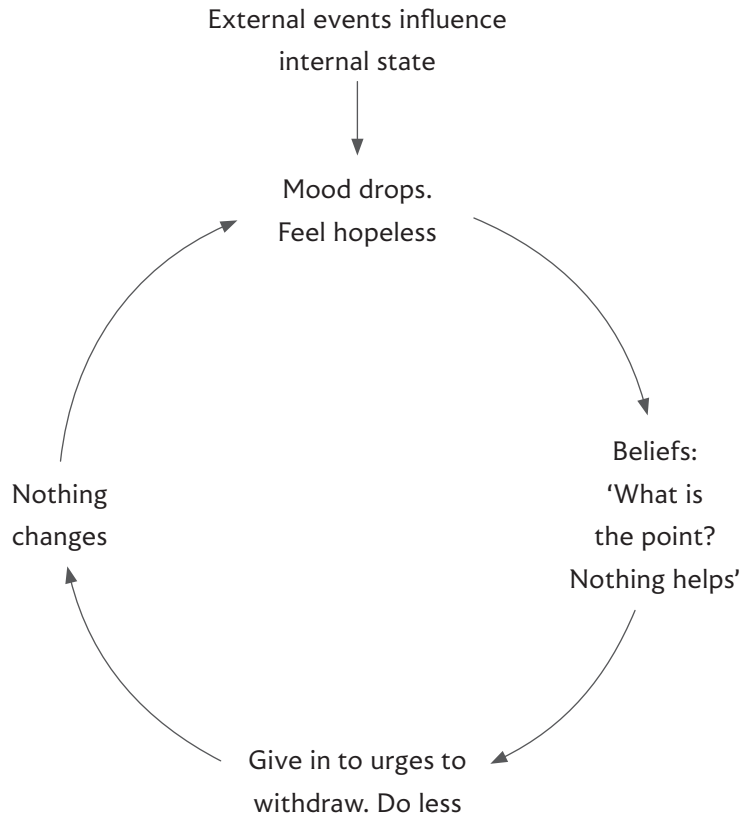


Figure 1: The downward spiral of low mood. How a few days of low mood can spiral into depression. Breaking the cycle is easier to do if we recognize it early and act on it. Adapted from Gilbert (1997).

So we get into these vicious cycles easily because all the different aspects of our experience are impacting each other. But while this shows us how we can get stuck in a rut, it also shows us the way out.

All these things are interacting to create our experience. But we don't experience our thoughts, bodily sensations, emotions and actions all separately. We experience them together as one. Like wicker strands woven together, it's hard to notice each one individually. We just experience the basket as a whole. That is why we need to get practised at breaking it down. When we do that we can more easily see what changes we could make. Figure 2, on the next page, shows a simple way to break down your experience.

When we break things down in this way, we can start to recognize not only what we do that keeps us stuck but also what we do that helps.

Most people come to therapy knowing that they want to feel different. They have some unpleasant (sometimes excruciating) feelings they don't want to have any more and are missing some of the more enriching emotions (such as joy and excitement) that they would like to feel more of. We can't just press a button and produce our desired set of emotions for the day. But we do know that how we feel is closely entwined with the state of our body, the thoughts we spend time with and our actions. Those other parts of our experience are the ones that we can influence and change. The constant feedback between the brain, the body and our environment means that we can use those to influence how we feel.

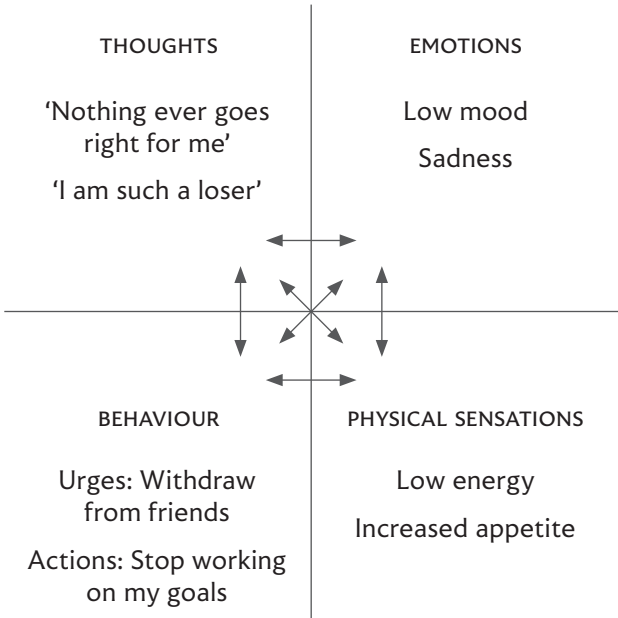


Figure 2: Spending time with negative thoughts makes it highly likely that I will feel low in mood. But feeling low in mood also makes me more vulnerable to having more negative thoughts. This shows us how we get stuck in cycles of low mood. But it also shows us the way out. Adapted from Greenberger & Padesky (2016).

Where to start

The first step to begin getting a grasp on low mood is to build our awareness of each aspect of the experience. This simply means noticing each one. This awareness starts off with hindsight. We look back on the day and choose moments to look at

in detail. Then, with time and practice, that builds our ability to notice them in the moment. This is where we get the opportunity to change things.

In therapy I might ask someone with low mood to notice where they feel it in their body. They might notice that they feel tired and lethargic or lose their appetite. They might also notice that when they feel low they have thoughts like, 'I don't feel like doing anything today. I am so lazy. I'll never be successful. What a loser.' They might have the urge to go back to hide in the bathroom at work for a while and scroll through social media.

Once you get familiar with what is going on inside your own body and mind, you can then expand that awareness to looking at what is going on in your environment and your relationships and the impact that is having on your internal experience and behaviour. Take your time getting to know the details. *When I am feeling this, what am I thinking about? When I am feeling this, what state is my body in? How was I looking after myself in the days or hours leading up to this feeling? Is this an emotion or just physical discomfort from an unmet need?* There are lots of questions. Sometimes the answers will be clear. Other times it will all feel too complex. That is OK. Continuing to explore and write down experiences will help to build up self-awareness about what makes things better and what makes things worse.



Toolkit: Reflect on what is contributing to your low mood

Use the cross-sectional formulation (see Figure 2, page 18) to practise the skill of picking up on the different aspects of

experiences, both positive and negative. You'll find a blank formulation on page 417 that you can fill in yourself. Take 10 minutes and pick a moment from that day to reflect on. You may notice that some boxes are easier to fill than the others.

Reflecting on moments after they happen will help to gradually build up the skill of noticing the links between those aspects of your experience as they happen.



Try this: You can use these prompts to help you fill in the formulation. Or you can simply use these as journal prompts.

- What was happening in the lead up to the moment you are reflecting on?
- What was happening just before you noticed the new feeling?
- What were your thoughts at the time?
- What were you focusing your attention on?
- What emotions were present?
- Where did you feel that in your body?
- What other physical sensations did you notice?
- What urges appeared for you?
- Did you act on those urges?
- If not, what did you do instead?
- How did your actions influence the emotions?
- How did your actions influence your thoughts and beliefs about the situation?

Chapter summary

- Mood fluctuation is normal. Nobody is happy all the time. But we don't have to be at the mercy of it either. There are things we can do that help.
- Feeling down is more likely to reflect unmet needs than a brain malfunction.
- Each moment of our lives can be broken down into the different aspects of our experience.
- Those things all influence each other. It shows us how we get stuck in a downward spiral of low mood or even depression.
- Our emotions are constructed through a number of things we can influence.
- We cannot directly choose our emotions and switch them on but we can use the things we can control to change how we feel.
- Using the cross-sectional formulation (see Figure 2, page 18) helps to increase awareness of what is impacting on our mood and keeping us stuck.

CHAPTER 2

Mood pitfalls to watch out for

The problem with instant relief

Low mood gives us the urge to do things that can make our mood even worse. When we feel discomfort and the threat of low mood, we want to get back to feeling lighter. Our brain already knows from experience what tends to help the quickest. So we feel urges to do whatever will make it all go away as soon as possible. We numb or distract ourselves, and push the feelings away. For some that is via alcohol, drugs or food. For others it is watching hours of TV or scrolling through social media. Each of those things are so inviting because they work – in the short term. They give us that instant distraction and numbing that we crave. That is, until we switch off the TV, close down the app, or sober up, and then the feelings come back. Each time we go round that cycle the feelings come back even more intense.

Mood pitfalls to watch out for

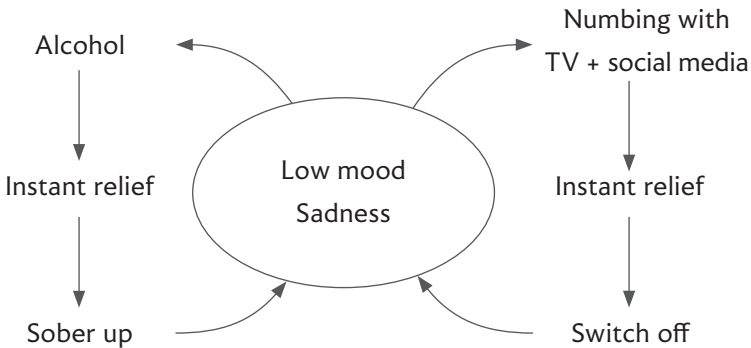


Figure 3: The vicious cycle of instant relief. Adapted from the work of Isabel Clarke (2016).

Finding ways to manage low mood involves reflecting on the ways in which we respond to those feelings, having compassion for our human need for relief, while also being honest with ourselves about which of those attempts to cope are making things worse in the longer term. Often the things that work best in the long term are not fast-acting.



Try this: Use these questions as journal prompts to help you reflect on your current coping strategies for low mood.

- When feeling low, what are your go-to responses?
- Do those responses provide instant relief from the pain and discomfort?
- What effect do they have in the long term?
- What do they cost you? (Not in money, but in time, effort, health, progress.)

Thought patterns that make you feel worse

As we discussed in the previous chapter, the relationship between thoughts and feelings goes both ways. The thoughts we spend time with affect how we feel, but how we feel also has an effect on the thought patterns that come up. Listed below are some of the thought biases that we commonly experience when mood is low. They might sound familiar and that's because thought biases are normal. They happen to everyone to varying degrees. But they are more likely to happen when we experience fluctuations in mood and emotional states. Understanding what they are and starting to notice them when they appear is a big step towards taking some of the power out of them.

Mind reading

Having a grasp on what the people around us are thinking and feeling is crucial for humans. We live in groups and depend on each other, so we all spend much of our lives making guesses about what other people are thinking and feeling. But when we're feeling down, we are more likely to assume that those guesses are true. 'When my friend looked at me funny I just *knew* she hated me.' But on a different day, when I'm not struggling with low mood, I might be more inclined to be a bit more curious about what was going on and possibly even ask her.

You might notice that you feel the need for more reassurance from others when your mood is low. If you don't get that

extra reassurance you might automatically assume that they are thinking negatively about you. But that is a bias, and it is quite possible that you are your worst critic.

Overgeneralization

When we are struggling with low mood it only takes one thing to go wrong, and we have that tendency to write off the whole day. You spill some milk in the morning. It goes everywhere. You feel stressed and frustrated as you don't want to be late. Overgeneralization is when we see this one event as a sign that today will be 'one of those days'. Nothing is going your way, it never does. You start asking the universe to give you a break because it sure as hell feels like it's against you today.

When this happens we start to expect more things to go wrong and it's a slippery slope towards hopelessness. Overgeneralizing thoughts particularly like to show up along with the pain of a breakup. One relationship ends and our thoughts start to suggest that this means we will never make a relationship work and could never be happy with anyone else. It is natural to have these thoughts, but left unchecked they will contribute to more pain and low mood.

Egocentric thinking

When times are hard and you're not feeling at your best, this tends to narrow our focus. It becomes more difficult to consider other people's opinions and perspectives, or that they might hold different values. This bias can cause problems in our relationships because it can disrupt how connected we feel to others.

On Dark Places

For example, we set ourselves a rule for living, something like, 'I must always be on time for everything.' We then apply that rule to others and feel offended or hurt when they fall short of that. That might make us feel less tolerant of others, disrupt our mood even further and add relationship tensions into the mix. This equates with trying to control the uncontrollable and inevitably sends our low mood spiralling down further.

Emotional reasoning

Just as thoughts are not facts, feelings are not facts either. Emotions are information, but when that information is powerful, intense and loud, as emotions can be, then we are more vulnerable to believing in them as a true reflection of what is going on. *I feel it therefore it must be a fact.* Emotional reasoning is a thought bias that leads us to use what we feel as evidence for something to be true, even when there might be plenty of evidence to suggest otherwise. For example, you walk out of an exam feeling deflated, low in mood and lacking in confidence. Emotional reasoning tells you this means you must have failed. You may have performed OK in the exam, but your brain takes information from how you feel and you're not feeling like a winner right now. The low mood could have been created by the stress followed by exhaustion, but the feeling is influencing how you then interpret your situation.

The mental filter

The thing about the human brain is that, when you believe something, the brain will scan the environment for any signs that the belief is true. Information that challenges our beliefs

about ourselves and the world is psychologically threatening. Things suddenly become unpredictable and that doesn't feel safe. So the brain tends to discount it and hold on to whatever fits with previous experience, even if that belief causes distress. So during hard times, when you may be feeling low and believe that you are a failure, your mind will act like a sieve, letting go of all the information that suggests otherwise, and holding on to any indication that you have not lived up to expectation.

Let's say you post a picture on social media and plenty of your followers leave positive comments. But you are not looking for those. You skim past them, searching for any negative ones. If you find any, you might then spend a significant portion of your day thinking it over, feeling hurt, and doubting yourself.

In evolutionary terms, it makes sense that when you feel vulnerable, you keep an extra lookout for signs of threat. But when you are trying to come back from a dark place, the mental filter is something to be aware of.

Musts and shoulds

Beware of those *musts* and *shoulds*! I don't mean the healthy and normal sense of duty we have to our community. I mean the relentless expectations that send us on a downward spiral of unhappiness. *I must be more this*, and *I should feel that*.

The musts and shoulds are heavily tied up with perfectionism. For example, if you feel you must never fail, you are setting yourself up for a rollercoaster of emotions and a struggle with mood when you make a mistake or encounter a setback. We can strive for success and accept failures along the way. But

when we set ourselves unrealistic expectations, we become trapped by them. That means we suffer whenever there is any sign that we may not be living up to them.

So watch out for those musts and shoulds. When you are already struggling with mood, expecting yourself to do, be and have everything that you are when you're at your best is not realistic or helpful.

All-or-nothing thinking

Also known as black-and-white thinking, this is another thought bias that can make mood worse if we leave it unchecked. This is when we think in absolutes or extremes. *I am either a success or a complete failure. If I don't look perfect, I'm ugly. If I make a mistake, I should never have bothered.* This polarized thinking style leaves no room for the grey areas that are often closer to reality. The reason this pattern of thought makes everything harder is because it makes us vulnerable to more intense emotional reactions. If failing one exam means you are a failure as a person, then the emotional fallout from that will be more extreme and much harder to pull back from.

When you feel low in mood, you're more likely to think in this polarized way. But it's important to remember that this is not because your brain is getting things wrong or malfunctioning in any way. When we are under stress, all-or-nothing thinking creates a sense of certainty or predictability about the world. What we then miss is the chance to think things through more logically, weighing up the different sides of the argument and coming to a more informed judgement.

Figure 4: Table of thought bias examples.

THOUGHT BIAS	WHAT IS IT?	EXAMPLE
Mind reading	Making assumptions about what others are thinking and feeling.	'She hasn't called in a while because she hates me.'
Overgeneralization	Taking one event and using it to generalize about other things.	'I failed my exam. My future is ruined.'
Egocentric thinking	Assuming that others have the same perspective and values as we have, and judging their behaviour through that lens.	'I would never be late like that. He obviously doesn't care enough about me.'
Emotional reasoning	I feel it, therefore it must be true.	'I feel guilty, therefore I am a bad parent.'
Musts and shoulds	Relentless and unrealistic expectations that set us up to feel like a failure every day.	'I must always look perfect.' 'I should never do any less than my absolute best.'

All-or-nothing thinking	Thinking in absolutes or extremes.	'If I don't get 100% I'm a failure.' 'If I don't look perfect I'm not going out.'
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What to do with thought biases

Now you know some of the common thought biases that can make your mood worse, what next? We can't stop those thoughts from arriving, but the power is all in seeing them for what they are (biased) and then managing how we respond to them. If we can acknowledge that each of our thoughts presents just one possible idea among many, then we open ourselves up to the possibility of considering others. This means the original thought has less power over our emotional state.

To be sure we respond to them in the way we want to, first we need to notice the biases when they appear. If we don't step back and see them as a bias, we buy into them as if they present a fair reflection of reality. Then they can feed that low mood and exert their influence over what we do next.

Noticing thought biases sounds obvious, and it is simple. But it's not always easy. When we're in the moment, we don't only experience a thought that we can see clearly. We experience the mess of emotions, physical sensations, images, memories and urges, all at once. We are so used to doing everything on

autopilot that stopping to check out the details of the process can take a lot of practice.

Here are some ways you can start to spot thought biases and the impact they have on you.

Getting started

- High emotion states can make it hard to think clearly, so it can be easier to start by reflecting on thought biases after the emotions of the moment have passed. You build your awareness by looking back, but that gradually builds towards awareness in real time.
- Start keeping a journal and choose specific moments to focus on (both positive and negative). Make a distinction between what you were thinking at the time, what emotions you noticed and what physical sensations came with that. Once you have the thoughts written down, go over the list of biases and see if your thoughts might have been biased at the time.
- If you are in the moment and have the chance to write something down, put pen to paper and express your thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations. But as you do that, try to use language that helps you get some distance from those thoughts and feelings. For example, *I am having thoughts that . . .* or *I am noticing these sensations*. This use of language helps you to step back from the thoughts and feelings, to see them as an

experience that is washing over you, rather than an absolute truth.

- If you have someone you trust and confide in, you can share with them the thought biases that you are prone to and they can help you to spot them and call them out. But this requires a very good relationship with someone who is accepting and respectful and supports you in your choice to work on change and growth. It is not easy to be called out in the moment, so this one takes some careful planning to make sure it works for you.
- Starting a mindfulness practice is the way forward when you want to get a bird's-eye view of what your thoughts are doing. Having a set time of the day when you pay attention to your thoughts is a great idea. It's your formal practice to build that ability to step back from your thoughts and observe them without judgement.

A few pointers

As we are building awareness of our thoughts, we need to work hard to see that pattern of thought as just one possible interpretation of the world and allow ourselves to consider alternatives. Spotting these common thought biases and labelling them helps us to do that.