

How to Engage with Life when you Feel Down (Psyche)

When you feel low or fed up, it's tempting to shut down and do very little. You might cancel activities and social events, and choose passive options instead, such as staying in bed or watching TV. It's easy to understand why this happens: when you feel down or depressed, even simple tasks take a lot of effort and energy. It can also be distressing if things aren't as enjoyable as they used to be.

Of course, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many people have had their activities and social events cancelled for them. For anyone experiencing depression or low mood, these restrictions will have compounded their desire to withdraw, and the prospect of coming out of lockdown might feel daunting. But, paradoxically, one of the most effective ways to improve a low mood is to do the very things you don't feel like doing.

In 1973, the American behavioral psychologist Charles Ferster noticed that people who feel low tend to do less. They engage in fewer activities that bring them enjoyment or meaning. He argued that this drop-in activity could be an important factor in understanding and treating depression. His observations provided the foundation for his behavioral model of depression, which still informs our understanding of the condition today.

According to behavioral approaches, depression is the result of a problematic cycle between reduced activity and low mood. The cycle begins when a person starts doing less, which means that they become more withdrawn and isolated. This, in turn, leads to fewer opportunities for positive experiences or distraction, exacerbating a person's low mood. This makes the person even less motivated to try effortful, interesting activities, and the cycle continues.

This negative cycle doesn't come out of nowhere; it often starts for a clear reason. The low mood seen in depression is often preceded by 'a big context shift', says Dean McMillan, professor of clinical psychology at Hull

York Medical School and the University of York. This shift is caused by a significant change in circumstances, such as a divorce, a demanding period at work – or a global pandemic. The context shift means that the activities a person used to enjoy becoming difficult or impossible. For example, after a divorce, people might find it upsetting to go to places they used to enjoy with their partner, or a student under pressure at university might be too tired to try once-loved hobbies. Similarly, after the prolonged isolation and inactivity of lockdown, previously enjoyed routines might be challenging or unappealing.

The risk then is that people withdraw further. They choose easy but unrewarding behaviors instead, such as staying at home (even as lockdown is lifted or as new social opportunities arise). At first, this makes good sense. ‘This withdrawal is driven by people’s desire to avoid the negative emotions that they’re experiencing when they try to do these activities,’ according to David Richards, a professor of mental health services research at the University of Exeter. McMillan agrees, adding that this behavior ‘works in the immediate term because it makes you feel better’. The difficulty lies in what this inactivity sets up in the long term. The risk, he says, is that ‘it moves you further from what you need to do to get something out of the world’.

The key to relieving depression, according to behavioral approaches, is to somehow break this cycle of inactivity and low mood. This is the main goal of the behavioral treatment that the American psychologist Peter Lewinsohn and his colleagues began developing in the 1960s. Today, this approach is known as behavioral activation (BA) and is well-established as an effective psychological therapy for depression.