



Action brings change

Improving low mood through action

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Flinders University Institute for Mental Health & Wellbeing



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University

Institute for Mental Health &

wellbeing

Ways to improve low mood?

In **Part 1 – Learn** of this chapter, you'll learn the science behind how our mood works and how *what we do* can shape *how we feel*.

In **Part 2 – Do**, you'll try out different actions to improve your low mood and reverse your negative mood spiral.

Then, **we will ask for your advice** on how to share this information with other people who have an eating disorder.

All the stories in this chapter are based on the experiences of real people who have struggled with eating disorders.



Help us help others!

People tell us the ideas in this chapter are interesting and helpful. But we need your help to learn how to best support people with eating disorders. By sharing your experiences and advice, the more we can help others.



We know that **you are the expert** in your life and have more insight into what it's like to be a person with an eating disorder.

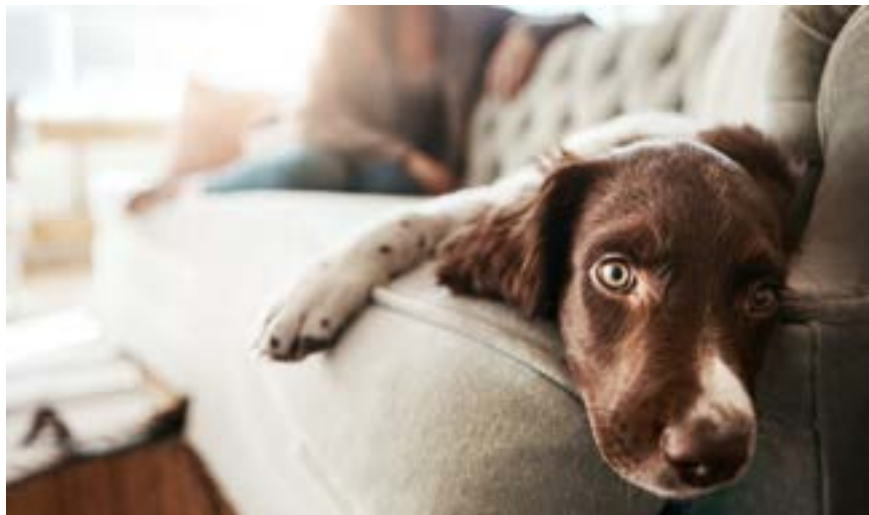
Please complete this chapter thoughtfully and share your feedback at the end to help us learn the best way to present this information to others like you.

Tell us what worked well for you and what didn't, so we can improve and make a real difference **together**.

Part 1 – Learn!

Have you ever noticed that certain things you do change the way you feel?

When you listen to sad music you may feel sad or blue.












When you are sitting in the sun in a park you may feel happy or content.



Let's try a quick experiment to see this in action.

On a scale from 1 (worst possible mood) to 10 (best possible mood),
where would you rate your mood RIGHT NOW?

| Worst possible mood |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | Best possible mood |
|---------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|---|--------------------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Watch one of the following YouTube clips:

You shall not pass, dog (dogs afraid to walk past cats)¹:



Olive and Mabel, the dog's breakfast grand final²:



Mila's (2-years old) morning³:



¹ Dogs afraid to walk past cats: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7znl_Kpzbs

² Dog's breakfast grand final: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPhpJuraz14>










³ Mila's morning: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMMrBiDd6CQ>

Now let's do a mood check in. Which of the following moods changed for you? Select as many as you want. We want to hear about which changes you noticed, no matter how small.

- ☐ Happy
- ☐ Excited
- ☐ Relaxed
- ☐ Entertained
- ☐ Thankful
- ☐ Interested

In a sentence, describe a YouTube video, Snapchat, or Tik Tok you've seen recently that made you feel even a little bit better.

Okay, let's do another quick mood check in. On a scale from 1 (worst possible mood) to 10 (best possible mood), where would you rate your mood RIGHT NOW?

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Worst possible mood |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | Best possible mood | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | | 10 |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | | | | | | | | | | | |

Did your mood improve just by watching a short clip?

The change may not be big, but most people say that watching a happy video boosted their mood just a bit.



This is just one example of what we do can shape how we feel!



**What we do (our actions) can change how we feel – for better or worse.
This includes how we act after stress and setbacks.**

Take Cat's story for an example... Cat's story is very common.

Cat's story:



I have been working with the same office for 5 years. An opportunity to go for a promotion came up and both I and a friend went for it. My friend got the job. I felt so stupid and embarrassed, everyone knew we had both applied. My friend was really nice about it but I was just so mad at myself. I felt stupid for thinking I could get the job. After that, things got tough. I just wanted to hide. I just kept thinking that others felt I was a loser. Hanging out with friends, going to work – it all seemed too much.

I didn't have energy for anything. I felt really low at that time. I started skipping meals because I didn't feel hungry. At the time I didn't understand what was happening.

I remember thinking: "Will I ever feel like myself again?"

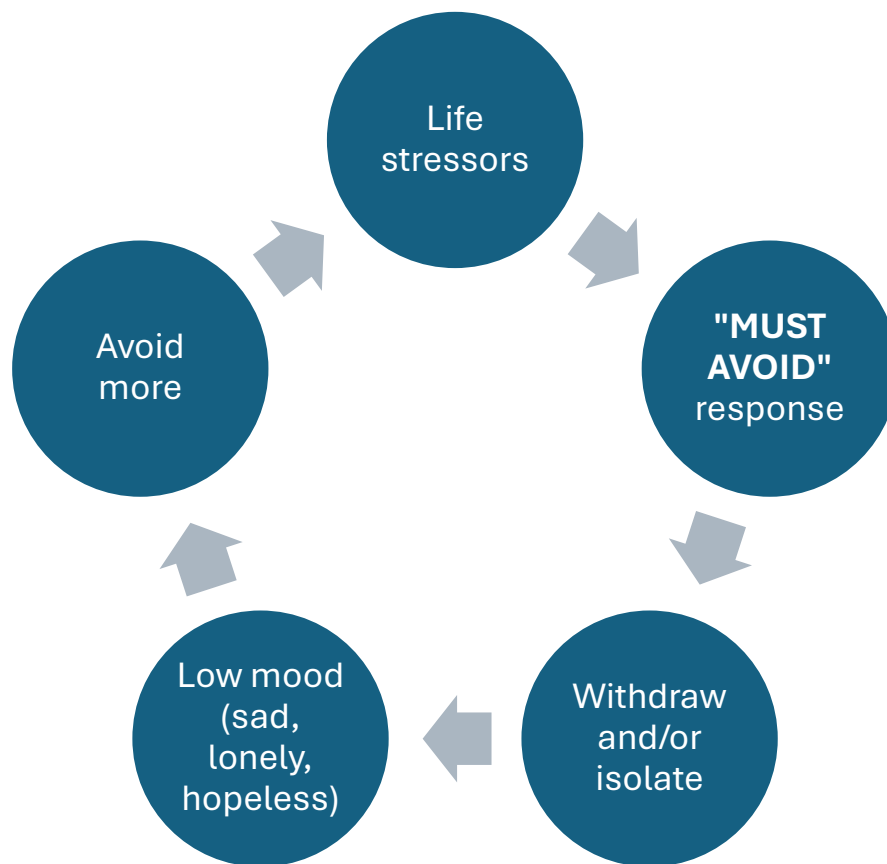
For most of us stressful events (like not getting a job we want) triggers a **“must avoid”** response. For Cat, this meant she wanted to hide, had low energy, ruminated (repetitive negative thoughts), and felt sad and unmotivated. In fact, the human brain is programmed and designed to respond to stress by avoiding danger!



For early humans this part of our brain helped us to keep safe, and to avoid some very bad things like getting eaten by a sabre-toothed tiger or getting clubbed over the head by a rival. And sometimes, it still protects us from danger.

But other times, our brain gets things wrong. It can stay in **“must avoid”** for longer than we need – even after the danger, or stressful event, is long gone.

When our brain makes a mistake and tells us to avoid for too long, we can sometimes fall into a negative mood spiral.



The more stress you experience, the harder it gets to enjoy the things you once loved. This happens to lots of people. **1 in 5 people** fall into a negative mood spiral that lasts for 2 weeks or more.



BUT good news – by taking action, you can actually reverse your spiral.

Part 2 – Do!

Research shows that at least **4 types of action** can help reverse negative spirals:

1. Connecting with people who make you feel good.
2. Achieving goals that matter to you.
3. Enjoying activities on your own.
4. Feeding your brain (see the research highlight below).

Research highlight

Research has shown that brain activity is affected by even modest dieting, and a young person's developing brain is particularly vulnerable. A starved brain shrinks and alters the ways in which we think, process information, and manage our emotions. Someone with a starved brain will struggle to make decisions, solve problems, and regulate their emotions.

Another factor is serotonin, which is decreased when dieting, particularly when we try to reduce carbohydrates. Serotonin depletion is associated with more depression, and this gets restored with adequate nutrition.

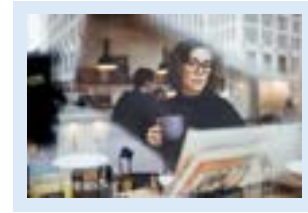
To start to feel better, the brain needs to be nourished. Because a starved brain won't function optimally, the first priority in treatment for an eating disorder is adequate nutrition.



What would you suggest Cat do to get out of her negative mood spiral?

You can pick one or more of these strategies:

- ☐ Connecting with people who make her feel good
- ☐ Achieving goals that matter to her
- ☐ Enjoying activities on her own
- ☐ Feeding her brain



What is one thing Cat could do to follow your suggestion? Tell us in 2-3 sentences below. If you're not sure, it is OK to guess.

Thanks for giving Cat advice! Here is what she ended up doing:

At first, I was sure how to start feeling like myself again. The only thing I could think of, was, I don't know – doing stuff that reminded me of me. It almost sounded too simple, but that is what I started to do.

I started focusing more on my hobby, photography. It was nice because it was just for me, and it felt good no matter how it ended up. I also kept hanging out with my best friend. And I accepted invites to drinks after work with some of my workmates a few times – the topic of the job never came up. I also made sure I had some carbohydrates regularly throughout the day. After a while I started feeling more like me, I'm not going to pretend it happened all at once – but doing this, even when I didn't totally feel like it, made things easier.



So, by acting differently, Cat actually reversed her negative mood spiral. This is something anyone can do, including you ... simply by taking action.



BONUS: The better you get at taking action, the more you can support others in coping with challenges too.

Let's choose ways you can start taking positive action in your own life.

1. Ways to help you connect with people

Using the list below, pick activities you could share with others.

| | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Baking or cooking a meal to share | <input type="checkbox"/> Listening to music |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Going out for a meal or a snack with a friend | <input type="checkbox"/> Playing online games |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Going for a walk | <input type="checkbox"/> Playing a sport |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sitting and chatting | <input type="checkbox"/> FaceTiming |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Talking on the phone | <input type="checkbox"/> Other ideas: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Watching a movie | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Watching a funny YouTube video | _____ |
| | _____ |

2. Ways you can achieve goals that matter to you

First, which big picture goal is most important to you right now? Then, which of the specific smaller goals do you want to try?

| Big Picture Goal | Specific Smaller Goals |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Doing well at study or work | <input type="checkbox"/> Completing assignments on time <input type="checkbox"/> Offering to take on more responsibility at work <input type="checkbox"/> Participating when the tutor asks a question <input type="checkbox"/> Getting to work on time <input type="checkbox"/> Asking the tutor questions <input type="checkbox"/> My own goal: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Having close friends | <input type="checkbox"/> Texting or calling a friend <input type="checkbox"/> Going to places with new people <input type="checkbox"/> Inviting a friend to hang out <input type="checkbox"/> Starting a conversation with a new person <input type="checkbox"/> Doing something nice for a friend <input type="checkbox"/> My own goal: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Getting better at a sport or a hobby | <input type="checkbox"/> Reading about the hobby or sport <input type="checkbox"/> Talking to a mentor or coach <input type="checkbox"/> Watching instructional videos <input type="checkbox"/> Spending time practising alone <input type="checkbox"/> Spending time practising with friends or teammates <input type="checkbox"/> My own goal: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Getting active | <input type="checkbox"/> Eating a healthy meal or snack <input type="checkbox"/> Drinking more water <input type="checkbox"/> Doing yoga or Pilates <input type="checkbox"/> Taking the stairs <input type="checkbox"/> Taking a walk <input type="checkbox"/> Taking the dog for more walks <input type="checkbox"/> My own goal: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spending time with family members | <input type="checkbox"/> Sitting and chatting <input type="checkbox"/> Watching a movie or TV show together <input type="checkbox"/> Planning a family activity <input type="checkbox"/> Eating a meal together <input type="checkbox"/> Having a phone or FaceTime conversation <input type="checkbox"/> My own goal: _____ |

3. Activities you can enjoy on your own

These are activities just for you that make you feel more like yourself. Which activities do you want to try?

| Anywhere activities | Outdoor activities | Indoor activities |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Collecting things – coins, shells etc | <input type="checkbox"/> Going hiking or bush walking | <input type="checkbox"/> Singing around the house |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Listening to music | <input type="checkbox"/> Going to the gym | <input type="checkbox"/> Cooking/baking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Engaging in hobbies | <input type="checkbox"/> Going to church, temple, mosque, or praying | <input type="checkbox"/> Taking care of my plants |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Playing musical instruments | <input type="checkbox"/> Going swimming | <input type="checkbox"/> Watching a tv show |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Helping someone | <input type="checkbox"/> Going to a movie | <input type="checkbox"/> Taking a bath |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daydreaming | <input type="checkbox"/> Playing sports | <input type="checkbox"/> Having a quiet evening |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Watching YouTube or Tik Tok videos | <input type="checkbox"/> Going to the beach | <input type="checkbox"/> Playing online games |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Thinking about my achievements | <input type="checkbox"/> Going for a walk | <input type="checkbox"/> Eating a delicious meal |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reading fiction or non-fiction | <input type="checkbox"/> Going to an art gallery or museum | <input type="checkbox"/> Doodling, sketching, painting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dancing | <input type="checkbox"/> Having a hot drink at a café | <input type="checkbox"/> Playing with my pets |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Meditating/yoga | <input type="checkbox"/> Enjoying a sunrise or sunset | <input type="checkbox"/> Arts and crafts, taking photos |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dressing up and looking nice | <input type="checkbox"/> Spending time outside or gardening | <input type="checkbox"/> Writing in a journal or diary |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Doing something new | <input type="checkbox"/> Doing volunteer work | <input type="checkbox"/> Writing – books, blogs, songs, poetry |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Thinking about something good in the future | <input type="checkbox"/> Planning parties or activities | <input type="checkbox"/> Looking at funny pictures online |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

Choose one of activities above and let's come up with details of the plan.

The activity I chose is: _____

My activity plan:

| | |
|--|--|
| What days of the week will you do this activity? | |
| What time of day can you do this activity? | |
| Where will you do this activity? | |
| How long will you do this activity for? | |
| Who will be with you? | |

4. How you can feed your brain



Choose a variety of whole grains and carbohydrate foods for dietary fibre, thiamine, folate, and iodine.

Carbohydrates are your body's main fuel, especially for your brain and muscles. Not eating enough can lead to tiredness, fatigue, dizziness, irritability, and depression. It can also trigger binge eating—especially in the afternoon (around 3–4 pm) when blood glucose levels naturally drop and cravings tend to kick in.

It is recommended that approximately 50% or more of total energy of your diet should come from carbohydrate. **Select at least 4 servings over the day** – examples of servings are below.⁴

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> ½ cup muesli | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ Corn Flakes | <input type="checkbox"/> ¾ cup cooked cous cous |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Sustain | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 roll | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked barley |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup All Bran | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 pita bread | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup sweet corn |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Sultana Bran | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 slices bread | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked quinoa |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Just Right | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 fruit toast | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup mashed potato |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked porridge | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 tortillas | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 medium baked potatoes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ cups Special K | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked pasta | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 large sweet potato |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ cups Rice Bubbles | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked rice | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 cups cooked noodles |

Thanks for putting together your own action plan. It is awesome that you have already taken steps toward positive action.

⁴ This information is available from the Real Food Guide - <https://cbt-t.sites.sheffield.ac.uk/resources>

But taking action isn't always easy.

Sometimes you may find yourself up against “**roadblock thoughts**” when you try to take positive action and reverse negative mood spirals.

Roadblock thoughts are negative, unhelpful, and exaggerated things people say to themselves that get in the way of their goals. Everyone has them from time to time.



Three **roadblocks** are especially common, these are:

1. I'm never in the mood to do fun things, so I just can't take positive action.
2. I wanted to take positive action today, but I just couldn't do it. This is impossible.
3. Taking action is too hard. I just can't do this alone.

Since everyone has a roadblock thought from time to time, it is a good idea for having a plan to deal with them. So, let's make a plan to deal with roadblock thoughts you might have in the future.



Let's look at each roadblock in turn.

1. I'm never in the mood to do fun things, so I just can't take positive action.

This is a very common thought. Sometimes it just takes time for your brain to “catch up” to the helpful actions you decide to do. In the meantime, here are some things you can try: break your activity into smaller pieces, plan your activities for times when you are sure you can really do them, tell someone you trust about your activity so they can support you, set an activity reminder on your phone, remind yourself that the activity will help your mood even when you don't feel like doing it.

2. I wanted to take positive action today, but I just couldn't do it. This is impossible.

That thought is perfectly normal – you will have easier days and harder days. Every day is a new chance to succeed. If you are really worn out, try something for 5 minutes to show yourself you are worthwhile. If you have more energy, try a hobby you like or a 10-minute walk. Every positive action is a step toward feeling better, no matter how small.

3. Taking action is too hard. I just can't do this alone.

Almost everybody needs help to take positive action. In fact, science shows us that just be asking for help can put us in a better mood. For some people, the best support comes from friends. For others it is family. If you are nervous about asking for support, you can do it in small ways first – you could ask a friend to check in with you to see if you have done your positive action for the day. You can even make a game of how many days in a row you can do it. *These are just examples – you are the expert on what getting support should look like for you.*

In the future, which roadblock do you think might get in your way most?

1. ☐ I'm never in the mood to do fun things.
2. ☐ I wanted to do my important activity today, but I just couldn't do it.
3. ☐ I don't know if I can do this alone.

**Let's make a plan for dealing with these roadblocks
if they come up for you.**

| Roadblock thought | My action plan |
|--|--|
| 1. I'm never in the mood to do fun things | <input type="checkbox"/> I can ask this person for help or support Person: |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> I can be a good friend to myself saying ... |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> One small thing I can do to take positive action is ... |
| 2. I wanted to take positive action today, but I just couldn't do it | <input type="checkbox"/> I can ask this person for help or support Person: |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> I can be a good friend to myself saying ... |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> One small thing I can do to take positive action is ... |
| 3. I don't know if I can do this alone | <input type="checkbox"/> I can ask this person for help or support Person: |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> I can be a good friend to myself saying ... |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> One small thing I can do to take positive action is ... |

Now we need your help...

Now that you've heard the science and heard from other people, we'd like you to share your own story and advice. We would like to use your story and advice to help other people like you to deal with some of the challenges they may be experiencing.



Imagine someone your age (Chris) who experiences the same roadblock that you selected above – the one you just made a plan to deal with.

Based on what you have learned today about the brain and taking positive action, what would you tell Chris to let them know that they can stand up to their roadblock thought and reverse their negative mood spiral?

How would you help Chris cope in a more helpful way?



Thank you for helping us today!

**And well done – you’ve completed the Action
Brings Change chapter!**

*Keep Up the
Good Work!*

Remember...

“One small positive action can
change the course of your
entire life.”

