Monitoring your mood

Summary

- Everybody gets moody. Moods are a natural part of your emotional rhythm.
- Understanding your moods helps you manage them and feel better faster.
- Sometimes moodiness signals a serious medical condition known as a 'mood disorder'.
- See your GP or healthcare professional if your moods are making it hard for you to function day to day.

Everybody gets moody. Some days you'll feel on top of the world and other days you'll feel like staying under the doona. It's okay to feel sad sometimes too.

Most people know when they are feeling 'in a mood'. But do you know what 'mood' means? Or where your mood comes from? Or how to change your mood?

Simply, a mood is part of your emotional rhythm, but a little less intense than an emotion. And it usually has a trigger, such as an event or experience.

Your mood may be something that you've tried to achieve (such as peacefulness from doing yoga) or something over which you feel you have no control (such as annoyance about a parking ticket). And it may last only a short while, or hang around.

Understanding your moods may help you work out what causes them and how you tend to behave when you are in different moods.

You probably know that you feel good when you are in a positive mood (such as when you feel content, loving or excited). And you probably know you feel much worse when you are in a negative mood (such as when you feel anxious, disgusted or annoyed).

Your moods are useful to you. And they are a big part of how you choose to behave and think. A negative mood can be a useful indicator of a problem that needs to be tackled.

Most moods pass within a day or so. And, even in a flat mood, you can still go about your daily activities. But if down or dark moods are significantly disrupting your life, it's important that you seek help.

What causes moods

Moods and emotions are complex. It's thought three factors combine to create them in the brain: biology (for example, hormones and brain chemicals), psychology (such as personality and learned responses), and environment (like illness and emotional stress).

Common, everyday causes of a negative mood are:

- **stress**
- **poor sleep**, tiredness and overwork
- **needing to eat**
- interactions with the people around you
- the news
- the weather
- hormonal changes, such as due to your period, puberty, menopause, or **pregnancy**
- lack of exercise
- a need for a break.

Other causes of a negative mood can include:
• drugs and alcohol
• poor nutrition
• medication side effects
• depression
• anxiety
• substance abuse
• attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder
• bipolar disorder
• dementia
• physical illness or chronic pain.

Some of these, such as your nutrition, exercise and sleep habits, or your use of alcohol and other drugs, are lifestyle related.

But your environment can also affect your mood in many ways, including:
• certain chemicals in your environment can trigger a negative reaction, such as additives and preservatives in food, or pesticides used in farming
• seasonal fluctuations in daylight and weather -- bad weather or limited daylight can make you feel flat or make life harder to manage
• noise pollution and poor air quality can affect your mental and physical health and wellbeing
• natural disasters can place significant stress on your mind and body.

Monitoring your mood
Understanding your moods helps you manage them and feel better faster.

If you are more aware of your moods, you may be able to better manage your lifestyle choices, make informed health decisions, prevent or avoid triggers of negative moods, and work towards a better quality of life.

The trick is to watch for changes in your mood, particularly any very high swings or very low dips (which may mean you need help to even out your emotional state). Self-monitoring is free and takes hardly any time. And it becomes easier as you make it part of your daily routine.

You may like to try some of these tools for tracking your moods:
• Read more about wellbeing.
• Monitor your moods and symptoms.
• Track your mood daily.

How to manage your moods
Usually, a low mood goes away quite quickly and does not require treatment. But, if your low moods are lasting for more than two weeks and you have felt sad, down or miserable most of the time or have lost interest in most of your usual activities, you could have depression. Make an appointment to talk to your GP about how you are feeling.

If your low moods are fairly frequent (and you do not have clinical depression or any other clinically diagnosed mental health issue), you may like to consider therapies such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) or mindfulness.

CBT involves looking at how you perceive events and how your thoughts about those events affect your mood.

Mindfulness is a popular approach to managing low mood, in which you maintain a moment-by-moment awareness of your thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations and environment. You accept what comes without judgement.

Other forms of counselling and psychological treatment are available. Discuss your options with your GP.

Complementary therapy

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Studies show St John's wort can be effective in mild to moderate depression and low mood.

Consult your GP before taking St John's wort or other complementary therapies, as they can interact with prescription medicines, alcohol and other drugs, and other complementary medicines to cause side effects.

**Medication**
Medication is usually not required for low mood. See your GP about your treatment options.

**Other ways to fix a low mood**
Make time to do things you enjoy or try something new. Here are a few tips:

- connect with others – you could take a friend to the movies, or just catch up for a coffee
- take time to enjoy – spend some time in your garden, go for a walk, or listen to some music
- participate and share interests – such as taking up a painting or language class, or joining a sports club
- contribute to your community – volunteer some of your time for a cause, or help out a neighbour or friend
- take care of yourself – have your hair cut, or a massage, or go for a swim
- challenge yourself – train for a running event, cook something new
- reduce your stress – declutter your house, do a yoga class or try meditation
- rest and refresh – plan a holiday (and take it!)
- notice the here and now – feel the sun and wind on your face, smell the scents of your garden, feel the warmth of your coffee cup in your hands
- ask for help – call a friend or family member, and talk to them about how you're feeling. Or you could visit your GP, or call a helpline.

**When it's more than moodiness**

**Mood disorders**
Sometimes moodiness signals a serious medical condition known as a 'mood disorder'. There are two main types of mood disorder: bipolar disorder (previously known as manic depression) and depressive disorders (such as depression, seasonal affective disorder and postnatal depression).

Moodiness may also reflect substance abuse or a medical condition such as dementia or cardiac disease.

Reacting negatively to life and having frequent bad moods doesn't necessarily mean you have a mood disorder or a serious health condition. But, if your moods are making it hard for you to work, socialise or function, see a healthcare professional.

**Worry**
If your moods are triggered by excessive worrying that seems difficult to control, you might have generalised anxiety disorder. This disorder involves excessive and ongoing worry or anxiety about common issues such as family, money or work problems.

Treatments and professional help are available for worry. See your GP for advice.

**How to help others with low mood**
Sometimes it's not you but your friend or loved one who's experiencing low mood. At these times you may like to try doing some of the social activities listed above. Go to a movie together or have a lunch date, watch old movies or go for a run in the park.

If you're concerned your friend or loved one's low moods could be a sign of a mental health problem, make time to ask 'Are you okay?', and really listen to what they have to say. SANE Australia has advice about how to respond to someone who tells you they're not okay. This includes encouraging them to seek professional help.

You may like to learn about mental health first aid [Better Health Channel > Healthy living > Healthy mind > Mental health first aid]. Mental health first aid is the help you give to someone developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis. You can give this first aid until the person has appropriate professional treatment or their crisis is resolved.

**Children's moods**

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While moods are common in children, sometimes their moodiness can be a sign of something more serious too. Talk to your children about how they are feeling. If you’re concerned there is something more serious going on, see a healthcare professional.

Raising Children Network has some tips for communicating with young children, and Headspace has advice for families about how to talk to young people about mental health.

If your child would like to talk to someone else about how they are feeling, Kids Helpline offers phone, email and webchat counselling services.

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Where to get help
- Your GP
- Psychologist
- beyondblue Tel. 1300 22 4636
- headspace (National Youth Mental Health Foundation)
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 55 1800
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- Parentline Victoria Tel. 13 22 89

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:
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