

Introducing CBT for Low Mood and Depression

Part 1: Doing More of What Matters to You

This is the first in a series of podcasts that will introduce you to some of the key principles of cognitive behavioural therapy for low mood and depression. CBT, as it's commonly called, is one of the most widely used therapies nowadays, and there's a lot of research supporting its effectiveness for depression. Of course, these podcasts can't hope to be a replacement for therapy. But they can give you some ideas to try which might help a little at a difficult time, and might be part of the process of working your way through it.

We're starting here with the "B" of CBT, and a strategy called behavioural activation. At its heart is a really simple idea: do more of what matters to you. But anyone who's had depression will know that this is anything but simple. I use the term 'depression' loosely here: it's a commonly used word, but means different things for different people. Perhaps you're finding yourself feeling down, irritable or tearful. Perhaps it's not so much what you're feeling as what you're not: struggling to muster the energy or enthusiasm for work or socialising, feeling flat or numb, disconnected from the world. These sorts of lingering changes in mood often come with related difficulties – problems with sleep, energy, appetite, concentration. People often describe just how effortful day-to-day activities become: like walking through treacle. Sometimes it can be a real struggle even to get out of bed, let alone get to a lecture or settle down to write an essay or tackle a problem sheet. Or perhaps work's OK – a refuge even – but the thought of going to a bop, or hall, or someone knocking on your door fills you with dread. And alongside these problems – the real double whammy of depression – is that stream of harsh, self-blaming thoughts that beats you up for what you're not doing, the gap between what you expect of yourself and what feels possible at the moment.

I'm not going to get into the whys and wherefores of depression in any detail here – indeed, the causes are usually complex, multiple and highly personal. Generally speaking, it can be seen as a response to life events or circumstances that feel overwhelming and unmanageable. Now there may be very clear reasons why you're feeling low right now, or there may not be – sometimes our feelings work in mysterious and opaque ways. Either way though, there are reasons. And so in finding ways to deal with depression, it's important to think about what those underlying causes might be. That may be hard to do on your own, and this is one way in which counselling can help.

Behavioural activation, the technique I'm going to talk about, focuses less on the historical causes of depression and more on the things keeping it going in the present. Basically the theory is that when you're feeling low, irritable, tired or whatever, the gut instinct is to shy away from doing things, to avoid the effort and pain they may entail. Now this is a pretty natural coping response – we want to get away from things that feel challenging or stressful in any way. In fact, some psychologists suggest there may be a kind of evolutionarily protective mechanism at play in depression – a kind of slow down and retreat instinct, once adaptive for times of threat or peril. Combine this with the human capacity for self-awareness, however, and the complex nature of the societies in which we now live, and it risks becoming something much more destructive. From a behavioural perspective, one of the big risks is that the avoidance instinct ends up inadvertently feeding the depression, because it means you miss out on things that might help to make you feel better. And so you feel even lower, and the cycle continues.

Behavioural activation is based on this model, and provides a way out of the cycle. Often when we're feeling low, or lacking in confidence, we can fall into the trap of thinking we must wait until we feel right internally, before taking action. Now this makes some sense, obviously we do want to listen to our thoughts, feelings and urges – the problem is that in depression our inner life takes on a consistently negative slant. When it really takes hold, this ends up keeping us paralysed, constantly waiting for the cloud to lift. The idea in Behavioural Activation is to work from the “outside in”: make a change to what you're doing first, then the thoughts, feelings and motivation will catch up. Have you ever had an experience where you were supposed to do something – let's say, go to the college bop – but really didn't feel like it and expected it to go badly, then you were cajoled into going and when you got there felt glad you made it? That's what we're aiming for. And the better you feel, the more motivated you become to do more of the things that matter to you, and so instead of a vicious cycle, you get a positive one.

So, the basic premise again: doing more of what matters to you. In the remainder of this podcast I'm going to unpick the nuances of this strategy by outlining my top tips for successful behavioural activation.

1. Watch out for the inner critic. I'm talking here about that lurking tendency to pull yourself down, to judge and evaluate and blame yourself. So often, for people who are depressed, the inner critic is a near-constant presence. Self-critical thoughts aren't just horrible in themselves, they can also sabotage the whole process of recovery. No technique is going to have any chance of helping if you're hating yourself whilst doing it. How then to respond? One thing that's worth asking yourself is: does the critic have a hidden agenda? Weird though this might sound, sometimes the critical voice is trying to protect you in some way: maybe it's pre-empting the criticism you fear from others, or preventing you from taking risks, or perhaps there's a fear of letting your standards slip, or losing control in some way. The problem is, this voice has become so powerful that it stops you taking any risks. Neurologically, the part of your brain that watches out for threats has gone into overdrive. So I won't say “let go” of the inner critic – if it was that easy you would have done it by now. But in embarking on behavioural activation, it's really important to be on your guard for ways in which the critic will seek to trip you up. This is new territory and novelty feeds the critic: it'll plant doubt, it'll underestimate you, it'll come down hard when things don't go well. Do your best to enter into this with kindness towards yourself. Remember: it's not your fault that you're feeling the way you are. Ready yourself to take some risks.
2. Gather some data. When you do behavioural activation with a therapist, they'll often start by getting you to keep a diary of your weekly activities and the extent to which they are providing three key things: enjoyment, achievement, and closeness to others. You can even crystalize the picture by rating these three feelings at times throughout the day, when you're doing different things. It might feel difficult taking a good look at how you're spending your time, but it's a really good way of making connections between what you're doing and how you're feeling. Often, when people do this exercise, they are surprised by patterns they hadn't noticed, by the balance of those three key ingredients - or lack of balance. Again though: approach it with curiosity and compassion towards yourself. If your diary looks bare, there is good reason for this.

3. Ask yourself what matters. Once you've got a good idea of how things are now, you're ready to think about where there's room for change. Remember the key principle: doing more of what matters to you. That last bit is important: this has no hope of working if the things you're doing more of aren't things you *really* care about. Try this exercise: split a page into 4 and write down what's important to you in 4 key life domains: work, play, relationships, and health. These are not hard and fast categories, feel free to tweak or add if they don't work for you. The important thing is to ask yourself what you value in these areas. These could be more abstract things like valuing trust or authenticity in relationships, or they might be very concrete: valuing tennis, or music. There is no right or wrong here, nobody can contest your values, nobody can decide them for you.

Sometimes it is hard to figure out what we value when we are surrounded by messages about what we should value. Here in Oxford, it can feel like the very air you're breathing is infused with smell of scholarship and academic excellence. There's lots that's great about this, but the value attached to achievement can mean that other values and parts of yourself get less of a look-in. Sometimes when you're depressed you can also lose touch with what you really value, or perhaps you've never really allowed yourself to think about this. Let this then be an exercise in discovery. Is there anything you've felt drawn to before but never had a chance to try? Are there memories you can bring to mind of times when you did feel that spark of enjoyment, closeness or achievement? If you're not sure yet, that's OK. No-one has all their values figured out and no-one lives by them all the time.

4. Pace yourself. A common trap here is judging yourself on the basis of what would have been possible before you started feeling the way you do now. This is unfair, and risks setting you up to fail. It can also make it difficult to even get started: if, somewhere in your mind, you're still expecting yourself to be as productive academically and ready to socialise as you used to be, that can feel daunting, overwhelming and off-putting. There's no shame in going slow. In fact, it may be a pretty sensible and responsible thing to do.
5. Plan it. Once you've got some idea of where you want to start, it's a good idea to give some careful thought to the practicalities: what exactly would be a good way to include more of what I value into my week? What is practically possible, when and how can I make time for it, and what do I need to do to prepare? Unless you get into the logistical details and protect the time, it's easy for it not to happen. And let's face it, in Oxford, the pressures on your time are enormous. How many times have you made a vague plan to meet up with someone sometime – the months go by and it never happens. But set a date there and then, the chances are it will. Try to find this same kind of commitment for yourself, and remind yourself the task is to see it through whether or not you feel like it when the time comes. The nice thing about having values as your compass here (rather than goals, which are more specific) is that there are usually lots of ways you can realise them. This gives you the flexibility to focus on what is possible and within your control in circumstances where there may be external barriers, be they money or weather or looming thesis deadlines.
6. Know what you're up against. I mentioned earlier on that trap where we think we have to feel motivated or ready before going through with something. I think there are probably

some social discourses feeding into this around what it means to be confident, mentally well and the like. But there can also be more insidious thoughts and feelings holding us back, that are more to do with what we perceive to be the costs or risks of engaging in the things we avoid. Perhaps there is some anxiety around certain types of activities. Perhaps there are feelings of anger or resentment bubbling away that need addressing. Sometimes, we get hemmed in by “shoulds” and “musts”: Are there ideas about what sorts of values or activities should be prioritised? Does part of you believe, somewhere, that enjoyable experiences must be earned? Are there fears around what would happen if you took your foot off the pedal and allowed yourself to let go a bit more? It’s worth giving some thought to whether there may be barriers such as these at play for you, and how they might hold you back from fully committing to the activities you’ve planned. Having these in clearer sight, and finding ways to talk them through if you need to, will mean you’re better equipped to manage them. If you find they run deep, consider whether counselling might help.

7. Finally, and linked to this last point: watch out for dampening appraisals. Sometimes, you can follow all this advice, but for some reason things don’t go well. You pick your activity, one you really value, you plan it carefully, see it through – and yet still, no spark, no real enjoyment or satisfaction. Sound familiar? If so, it may be important to think not just about what you’re doing but how you’re doing it. Depression has a knack for sucking the joy out of things. Psychologist Barney Dunn talks about its capacity to “turn gold into lead”, or, more bluntly, to “piss on the parade”. It does this by planting what he calls “dampening appraisals” in our minds. These are basically ways of processing what we’re doing that tone down our chances of deriving pleasure from them. “I don’t deserve this” is a common one. “It’s not going to last” is another. Comparisons to a time when things were easier, smoother, to the natural ease with which other people seem to be doing whatever it is you’re doing. These kinds of thoughts are typically pretty automatic, and they have a pernicious effect, drawing you out of the flow, making it harder to be present and engaged. So watch out for them. A good way to tackle dampening appraisals is to practice cultivating an ability to engage wholeheartedly in what you’re doing – in other words, engaging in it mindfully. If you notice your mind questioning, dampening, try to bring it back to the activity at hand. Notice the sights and sounds on your walk. Really listen to what your friend is saying. Enjoy that coffee and cake in all its sweet, rich deliciousness. Again, this is difficult stuff. Try not to beat yourself up when your mind wanders, when it all comes crashing down – it probably will sometimes – this stuff takes practice. And when you do feel that spark of enjoyment, stay with it, trust it, allow yourself to make the most of it.

That brings us to the end of this first podcast. If you’d like to find out more about behavioural activation, do check out the links on our website – many of the books listed are also available to you online with your library login. The next podcast will introduce you to some of the cognitive techniques in CBT. But I want to end by reminding you that you don’t need to go it alone – indeed, for many people with depression, professional help in the form of therapy, medication or both plays a vital role in the process of getting better. Various forms of support are available to you in Oxford, and you can contact the university counselling service directly using the details on our website, or you can make an appointment with your GP. If you are struggling, do reach out.