

Supporting low mood in adolescents – strategies for parents

Possible indicators of low mood in adolescents

- Sadness (with or without crying)
- Anxiety
- Temper outbursts and/or violent episodes
- Easily irritated
- Self-critical remarks
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Little or no appetite, or eating too often
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Loss of interest in activities usually enjoyed (including school activities)
- Feelings of fear (even if there is no conscious reason)
- Increased use of alcohol/drugs
- Worsening grades and/or missing school.

Severity

Mild depression can cause the young person (YP) to feel unhappy, but won't stop him or her from leading a normal life. S/he may find everyday things difficult to do and less worthwhile. If the YP makes some simple lifestyle changes, it can help him or her to recover from mild depression.

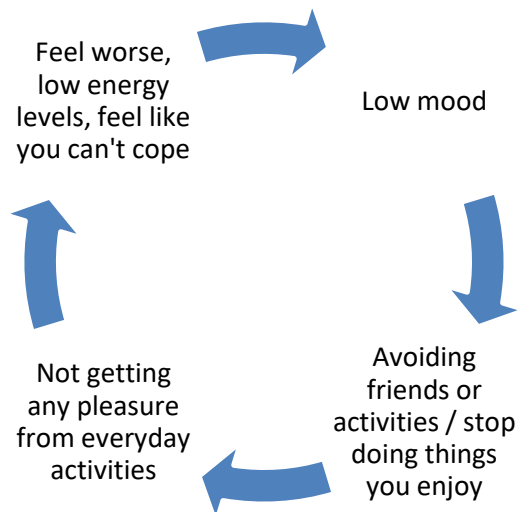
Moderate depression can have a significant impact on the YP's life and it can make him or her feel constantly miserable and low. It may be difficult to tackle this without professional help.

Severe depression can cause YP to have constant negative thoughts and feel like he or she isn't able to cope. It's important to seek help, particularly if the YP is having suicidal thoughts.

What is Behavioural Activation?

Behavioural Activation is a psychological treatment developed for depression. It is based on the theory that when you are feeling down, you tend to want to do less, and therefore experience less joy / positive experiences. BA interventions involve helping the young person to plan more activities they actually enjoy doing and examining their mood to see if doing more helps break the negative cycle. It is suitable for *mild* depression.

Below: the cycle of low mood.



Behavioural Activation works to break this vicious cycle. It can help to change how you feel by changing what you do (even if you don't feel like doing it at the time). If you do more, you will have more positive experiences, which can improve the way you feel.

Making activity plans

- Start by exploring with the young person what they are already doing that they enjoy/gives them pleasure. This can include activities that they used to do but no longer do, as it may be they might want to re start these activities.
- Adult must be a 'co- explorer' with the child/young person - don't make all the suggestions or take over!
- When you have looked at the current situation - start to explore other activities they might be interested in/enjoy, or they have ever thought about.
- Note: activities are something that can be observed by others, e.g. go for a run (not 'try to think happier thoughts'). They do not have to be "big goals" (e.g. run a marathon) - in fact, the smaller and more achievable the goals the more do-able it will feel and therefore the better the chance of the young person trying them out. It is important for the young person to think about trying activities (new to them or to re-start old interests) that are important to them and not dictated to them by adults. These are more effective when guided by values (things that 'matter' to them).

Example activities to try:

Caring for family members

- Help my mum cook dinner
- Babysit for my sister's children once per week

Being an attentive friend

- Text my friend.
- Ask my friend about their week (what happened)

Caring for my boyfriend/girlfriend

- Make special plans with him/her
- Tell him/her that I care about them
- Buy or make him/her a surprise gift

Find out about the world around me

- Watch the news on TV
- Talk about current events with my parents

Being active

- Take the dog for a walk
- Play a game of football on Saturday

Being physically healthy

- Eat home-cooked meals
- Go for a run once a week

Talking to someone about problems and feelings

- Ask a friend round
- Write in a journal

Once you have come up (jointly) with an activity, plan in advance for a day and time for the young person to complete it. Write planned activities down in a diary.

Things to think about:

- When they could do this
- How will it fit into their week
- Might need to break the activity into steps
- Who needs to help them/be involved with them with it
- Is there anything that might get in the way of them doing it
- Plan with them when they will start it
- Helps to have a written / visual plan
- Agree when you are going to review the plan with them

If the young person is struggling to come up with any new ideas, you could try phrasing “I wonder if you might like to try X”. (Don't say, “I think you need to do X” as this is imposing adult ideas rather than encouraging the young person to generate their own goals and solutions and follow them through).

Reviewing

As young people begin to re-activate, they may run into problems. Ask the young person how the plan went.

- Did you complete the activity? When was this?
- Was it when you planned to do it? If not, what happened?
- If you did complete the activity, how much did you enjoy it?
- If you did complete the activity, how important was this activity to you?
- If you didn't complete the activity, can you think why not? Is there something different you could have done or someone that could have helped?