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Shake it Off: Boosting Your Mood

Have you ever had a bad mood you just couldn't shake? Everyone feels grouchy or irritable some days. But a bad mood or major mood swings that go on too long may signal a bigger problem. The good news is that certain healthy habits can help you boost your mood.

"Some people are more moody than other people. Normal mood actually varies from person to person," explains Dr. Carlos Zarate, chief of NIH's mood disorders group.

That's because we all have different "temperaments," or combinations of personality traits that are biologically based. These are fairly stable over time.

"Considerable research shows that people really differ in their basic temperament," says Dr. Maria Kovacs, an NIH-funded psychologist at the University of Pittsburgh. "There are some people who temperamentally are always in a 'good' mood. And there are people who are temperamentally always in a 'bad' mood."

For example, Zarate says, some people don't seem to be fazed no matter what happens. Others worry about minor things and tend to overblow them.

People who have a more negative temperament tend to have a higher risk for mood and anxiety disorders.

Changing Moods

It's not only temperament that affects how you feel each day. Daily habits that affect your ability to manage stress—like diet, exercise, sleep, or how much alcohol you drink—play an important role, too.

"If you address those factors—have good diet, good exercise, good sleep-wake habits, regular activities, routines, and try to disconnect from work and other stressors—those do have beneficial effects on mood and keeping you healthy," Zarate says.

Other biological factors can affect your mood too, like hormones. Women may experience shifts in hormones during their menstrual cycles, pregnancy, and menopause that cause mood changes. Men can have decreases in testosterone as they age, which has been linked to depression.

Certain medical conditions, such as a vitamin deficiency, can make you feel “down” or lack energy. Mental health conditions like depression and bipolar disorder can also cause you to feel very sad and have low energy.

Other mental health conditions can cause mood issues as well—for example, anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and personality disorders.

It’s okay once in a while for people not to have a good mood, Zarate explains. “Moods that fluctuate occasionally are a normal thing. It’s when it’s combined with other symptoms—like significant distress and/or impairment of function or relationships—that it becomes an issue.”

People may not know when their mood has become a problem. “Friends and family members should be open and honest with each other and let them know what they’re seeing,” he says, “because it can lead to strain on family relationships, other relationships, or work issues.”

Bouncing Back

“Mood is a normal part of life, and having emotions is a normal part of life,” Kovacs says. “Sometimes you feel more negative than other times. That’s not necessarily bad.”

Kovacs studies the strategies people use to repair their mood when feeling down. Her team and others have shown that what you do when feeling down can boost your mood or spiral you into feeling worse.

“One of the most common strategies that both children and adults use is what I call ‘attention refocusing,’” she explains. “Meaning that they stop paying attention to whatever is making them miserable or unhappy and they start putting their attention elsewhere.”

For kids, this may mean finding a specific task to do when they’re upset, like helping a parent with chores or finding someone to play with. For adults, it may mean having

a conversation with a friend or going for a walk or to see a movie.

Kovacs has found that people with depression or other mental health conditions tend to turn to coping strategies that worsen their mood rather than lift it. For example, thinking about what's bothering them over and over again or avoiding or hiding their feelings. These strategies can make negative feelings stronger or last longer.

Her research has shown that people often use the same strategies that their parents or older siblings use. It can be hard to change the strategies to manage emotions because people are not always aware of them. For those with mood problems, talking with a mental health professional can help to identify negative patterns and choose healthier coping skills.

"If you come from a family that has a history of depression, it's incredibly important to try to create an environment for yourself that can maximize the likelihood that you're not going to get into a depression," Kovacs says. That means avoiding things that can trigger depression or anxiety, like not getting enough sleep or exercise.

Keeping Track

Charting your moods can help you figure out what's affecting how you feel. There are even apps that help.

Dr. David C. Mohr, who studies technology-based mental health interventions at Northwestern University, has found that people want to do more than just track their moods using apps. They want to see how their activities and moods are related, to help them take action to feel better.

"That sounds like a simple task, but it's difficult to do in a way—and provide information back in a way— that's understandable and reliable," Mohr explains. "That's one of the directions we're working on right now."

Mohr's team is developing ways to teach coping skills and deliver mental health services remotely. They've designed a set of apps called [IntelliCare](#) that give strategies for improving mental health. They also created a "hub" app, IntelliCare Hub, that recommends which of the apps to try based on how you're feeling.

The team tested whether using the hub app could improve symptoms of depression and anxiety in over 90 people. The participants used the app for eight weeks and

had a coach who texted them a few times a week to check-in.

“What we see is that we get significant drops in depression and anxiety, similar to what you’d see in psychotherapy or medications,” Mohr says. But more studies are needed to understand the effects of mental health apps like these.

If your mood is making it hard to cope with daily life, talk with your health care provider. If you’re having suicidal thoughts, call your doctor immediately or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK.

Wise Choices

Signs and Symptoms of a Mood Disorder

If you’ve been feeling down or lacked energy for a while, talk with your doctor. Here are some things to look for:

- Continuously feeling sad, anxious, “empty,” or irritable
- Feeling guilty, worthless, helpless, or hopeless
- Losing interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities
- Low energy or fatigue
- Moving or talking more slowly
- Feeling restless or having trouble sitting still
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Difficulty sleeping, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts
- Difficulty controlling worries
- Aches or pains, headaches, or digestive problems without a clear physical cause

Links

- [Q&A: Dr. Maria Kovacs on Mood and Depression](#)
- [Mental Health Disorders](#)
- [Depression and Older Adults](#)
- [Major Ups and Downs: Bipolar Disorder Brings Extreme Mood Swings](#)
- [The Sorrow of Suicide: Awareness and Action Can Help Save a Life](#)
- [The Benefits of Slumber: Why You Need a Good Night’s Sleep](#)
- [Feeling Stressed? Stress Relief Might Help Your Health](#)

- [Understanding Anxiety Disorders: When Panic, Fear, and Worries Overwhelm](#)
 - [Hurtful Emotions: Understanding Self-Harm](#)
 - [Preparing for Menopause: A Woman's Midlife Change](#)
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