



Get a Grip!

Managing Moods and Emotions

by *Stephanie van Ulft, M.D.*

Introduction

Carol was having a bad day. Nothing seemed to go right. She overslept, and then had to rush to get ready for work. Driving on the interstate, she had to wait for construction crews to finish work on a bridge. When she finally arrived late at the office, she snapped at her secretary, was angry with her boss for calling her into a meeting, and was generally irritable for the rest of the day. After staying late at work, she arrived home only to have her husband accuse her with, “Why are you in such a bad mood?”

I’m pretty certain you relate to Carol’s “bad day” and “bad mood.” At least I can. Perhaps you’ve noticed that your bad moods are becoming increasingly common and difficult for you (and others!) to handle. Perhaps your family or friends are even avoiding you because of the way you act and react when in a bad mood. Perhaps you just want to feel that you can have a better grip on your emotions than you have in the past. If so, then this booklet is for you! It is my hope to offer help by presenting beneficial tips for managing moods and emotions (before they manage you).

Basic Emotions

Let’s first take a look at the nuts and bolts of emotions. Emotions are basic instruments of survival and adaptation. Imagine, if you will, a world without emotions. In such a world, people would be incapable of feeling love or hate, joy or sadness, surprise or anticipation. No bonds of attachment would be formed within families or within society. People would have no concept of morality, loyalty, pride of accomplishment, shame or guilt. The world would be without fear. There would be no grieving when someone died. Art and music could not be enjoyed because there would be no enjoyment of beauty. In such a world, society would soon disappear and the human species would soon die out.

Emotions are critical to the growth and maturity of an individual and to the functioning of society, as they allow us to empathize with others. People manifest their emotional state in different ways: through physiological reactions (such as having their heart race when startled by a loud noise), through behaviors (such as clenching their fists in anger) and through feelings or “moods” (having an awareness of an emotion, although it may be difficult to put into words). One example would be when feeling embarrassed, a person might say he or she would like to disappear.

If you take a look at newborn infants, you can see that excitement rising from some sort of strong stimulus can be distinguished either as “delight” or “distress.” If we take a look at ourselves, we can see that the following four primary emotions seem to have developed from the first delight and distress responses: ¹

- **Joy (happiness)**—This emotion results from the gratification of obtaining a desired goal. Elation is usually regarded as the second level in the scale of pleasurable affects, followed by ecstasy or exaltation.
- **Anger**—This emotion results from distress, it’s usually felt to be the outcome of frustration and the inability to achieve a desired goal. Frustrations seem to fit into one of three general categories: *environmental* (caused by external obstacles), *personal* (caused by an inability to achieve goals because they are beyond an individual’s ability), and *conflict* (between goals that are at odds with each other).
- **Fear**—This emotion arises from a perception of impending danger or disaster, resulting in feelings of avoidance or a need to escape from the threat.
- **Sadness (sorrow or grief)**—This emotion is caused by the loss of someone or something that is loved and/or feelings of futility or helplessness.

In addition to these four primary emotions, two others are universally recognized. Interestingly enough, around the world the four primary emotions above plus the two listed below can both be named and picked out by others based simply on facial expressions: ²

- **Disgust**—This emotion exhibits distaste or deep aversion to something or someone. The opposite emotion is acceptance, indicating approval and inclusion of the object or person.
- **Surprise**—This emotion shows wonder, amazement or astonishment at the unexpected. The opposite emotion is anticipation where the expected occurs.

As more has been discovered about the functioning of the brain, we have found these emotions can be localized to certain areas of the brain and that their expression is chemically mediated. In other words, if certain chemicals are lacking or imbalanced within the brain, what we might actually see is an overabundance—or a lack of a particular emotion.

Let me give you some examples: Say someone is experiencing depression, he or she may not be able to feel the normal emotions of joy or surprise, and instead may feel overwhelmed by despair or sadness. Or in the case of anxiety disorders or phobias, a person may have an overabundance of emotions such as fear or disgust. One of the benefits of this discovery is that in some situations and illnesses, knowing about these chemical imbalances can lead to medications that can help modify the emotional response, returning it to a more normal level. But before jumping to the conclusion that you (or someone you know) need such medication, consult a doctor.

Is There a Difference Between Emotions and Moods?

Most people don’t talk much about their “emotions”; instead, they talk about their “moods.” All of us can readily understand when a friend tells us, “I’m in a bad mood.” And we can easily picture someone described as “moody.” Sometimes we use other words or phrases to describe moodiness: “down in the dumps,” “singing the blues,” “being cranky,” “grumpy” or “grouchy.”

The technical definition for mood is “a pervasive and sustained emotion that colors the person’s perception of the world.”³ That means our moods are really an extension of the emotions we feel inside and are a means of showing how we feel at a particular time. If we feel rushed or disappointed, our mood may be correspondingly low. If we win a race or receive a major award, our mood may be correspondingly high.

Moods can change and often depend on the circumstances surrounding us. They may even fluctuate rapidly between extremes (laughing one minute and crying the next). Often our facial expressions give clues as to the nature of our moods as do nonverbal communications such as posture, hand position, eye movement and body tension.

Can Bad Moods be Triggered?

Since our moods are often dependent on our circumstances, it should be obvious that each of us may have triggers that can cause us to become more moody or feel “down in the dumps.” These triggers may be different for each one of us, but some common triggers are listed below. As you look through the list, see if you can find triggers that seem particularly common for you. Once you begin to see a pattern for your mood triggers, try to see if you can avoid these triggers or find ways to lessen their impact on your mental state.

Common Emotional Triggers

Disappointments: Disappointments in any area of life may cause moodiness. The most common disappointments fall into these categories: work, relationships, school, financial or health. Not living up to expectations—wanting more than is possible, expecting a reward or praise that is not forthcoming, building up an unrealistic scenario in our minds—all may put us in a worse mood.

Too many demands: Stress levels rise as we feel excessive demands imposing on our lives.

Feeling rushed or lacking time: In today’s harried world, many people feel they must rush in order to accomplish everything that needs to get done. This frantic pace often leads to bad moods.

Coming down from a “mountaintop” experience: It’s often difficult to sustain the highs of a life-changing experience, and a shift to a worse mood may occur shortly after such mountaintop experiences.

Discontentment, envy or jealousy: All of these promote feelings of decreased self-worth and increase the risk of mood problems.

Loss or grief: Sometimes even minor losses may trigger a bad mood. Losses could range from a loss of a much-loved pet or of a valued personal item to losing a beloved friend or relative. Other losses may be ongoing but just as difficult: loss of independence, loss of health, or loss of a friendship. Any loss can put us in a worse mood.

Changes in routine: Unexpected changes may be especially difficult to accept and may make us more irritable and cause moodiness.

Illness or physical disability: When we do not feel good physically, it’s also easier to be discontented mentally.

Lack of sleep: Lack of sleep or insomnia often causes irritability, impatience and grouchiness.

Feeling a loss of control over events or your environment: All of us need to feel like we have some control over the events in our day-to-day lives. When we lose this, we are at risk of becoming moody.

Arguments with others: Unresolved arguments tend to perpetuate bad moods.

Hearing and paying attention to negative comments and criticism: Most people do not take criticism and negative comments very well. They can cause feelings of rejection, dejection and poor self-worth.

Being around other moody or joyless people:

If you can identify a number of triggers from this list that pertain to you and your situation, the next step is to truthfully ask yourself how you respond to these triggers. Do you find yourself becoming impatient, grouchy or angry? Do you become defensive when others tell you, “You’re just not yourself today”? Do you blame others for your bad moods? If your answer is “yes” to any of these questions, then it’s vitally important you find a way to handle your emotions without adversely affecting your relationships with others or without causing increased stress to yourself.

Mood-Busters

Once you recognize you’re in the middle of a bad mood, is it possible to do something to stop it?

The answer is YES! You will have taken the first steps by recognizing that your bad mood exists, recognizing any triggers that may have contributed to the mood, and taking responsibility for your own emotions rather than blaming someone or something else.

Next, you need to find a way to turn the bad mood around and focus instead on more positive emotions. Usually each of us can find several ways to disperse a bad mood, and sometimes we’ll need to go through several different possibilities before we see the benefits and actually feel better.

You might even consider keeping a list of potential mood-busters in your pocket or purse, so you can refer to them when needed. That way you won’t need to come up with solutions when a bad mood hits.

Here are some common strategies for dealing with bad moods:

- 1. Restructure negative thinking.** At the simplest level, this means recognizing negative thoughts and trying to turn them around. Cognitive therapy (a formal type of psychotherapy) is based on this concept. When we’re in a bad mood, we often view things as “black or white,” “all or nothing,” or in the most pessimistic way possible. That’s when we need to consciously examine our thoughts for these negative interpretations and restructure our thoughts in more positive terms.
- 2. Get at least seven to eight hours of sleep per night.** There is no doubt that insufficient sleep contributes to irritability and moodiness. Most people need at least seven hours of sleep per night and some even need more.
- 3. Exercise.** Exercise promotes the release of brain chemicals that help elevate mood, thus making you feel better. Regular exercise will promote a healthier mental state.
- 4. Stick to a healthy diet.** A proper combination of foods contributes to a healthy sense of well-being. A balance of adequate amounts of fats, carbohydrates, proteins and water is vitally important.
- 5. Use excess energy in a positive way.** Instead of expending energy being angry or upset, use the energy to work in your garden, to start a new project, or to build something out of wood or sew a craft.

- 6. Apologize if you have wronged someone.** Be willing to admit when you are wrong and eager to forgive others when they have hurt you. Don't let resentments and grudges grow.
- 7. Find something to laugh about.** Read a funny story; catch a funny movie; read the comics, and laugh ... often. This helps keep bad moods away.
- 8. Talk about your problems.** Sharing your burden with an empathetic listener will make it seem lighter. This can be as simple as talking to a friend or spouse or child, or it can be more formal, if you feel a mental health professional is indicated.
- 9. Write your feelings in a private journal.** No one needs to ever read what you write, but the act of writing some of your most distressful and emotional thoughts will help to alleviate them.
- 10. Express your feelings creatively.** Try writing poetry, composing music or painting a picture.
- 11. Volunteer your time.** It's hard to feel sorry for yourself and remain in a bad mood when you are helping others.
- 12. Bring past events to mind that made you feel good.** Take a few minutes to re-experience a particularly good memory, and let the good mood from that memory grow on you.
- 13. Plan a "dream" vacation.** Take some time to relax, close your eyes, and think of your favorite vacation spot. This can be a quick way to escape from the stress of the day.
- 14. Try some relaxation exercises.** Deep breathing for a few minutes can ease stress. Rolling your neck or doing some desk exercises can also help stop a bad mood before it progresses.
- 15. Pamper yourself.** Pampering yourself can be as easy as taking a bubble bath, closing the door to intrusions for half an hour, or allowing yourself the luxury of a hot fudge sundae. It doesn't need to be expensive, but it should be something you do not ordinarily do or give yourself.
- 16. Make a gratitude list.** Force yourself to take five minutes to write down the good things or the important people in your life. It's hard to stay moody when realizing all the blessings we've already been given.
- 17. Throw a "pity party" for yourself with you as the invited guest.** Sometimes you need to release the sadness and bad feelings you are experiencing all at one time. By forcing yourself to cry, grieve, listen to sad music, or look at photos that bring back sad memories, you release these emotions in a controlled environment and for a limited period of time. By giving yourself permission to let the emotions out, it becomes easier to move forward with more positive and productive feelings.
- 18. Keep your perspective.** Remember that no matter how bad your mood feels at the current time, it will not last. "This, too, shall pass."

Can Our Moods Affect Others?

We are all familiar with the fact that we pick up emotions and moods from those around us. In other words, moods can be contagious. This can be either good or bad. Children pick up the emotional states of their parents and can use this to play one parent against another. Elderly patients with Alzheimer's disease pick up the emotions of the nursing home staff they encounter on a daily basis. If the staff is anxious, their patients also tend to be more agitated. Bad moods seem to rub off onto our family and colleagues.

Conversely, when one is in a good mood others can sense this and will respond appropriately. Someone who maintains calm in a crisis tends to encourage that calmness in others. By gauging our own moods accurately, we will have a better chance of keeping them from interfering with our work and relationships.

Is There a Difference Between a Bad Mood and Clinical Depression?

Almost everyone will experience bad moods, but not everyone will experience clinical depression. Clinical depression (or major depression) is a specific psychiatric illness, which affects up to 10-25 percent of all women and 5-12 percent of all men at some point in their lives. Some people have recurrent episodes of major depression. A bad mood may last for a few hours or a few days, but major depression may last weeks to months.

Criteria for major depression includes five of the following symptoms during a two-week period, with these symptoms representing a change from a previous level of functioning: ⁴

Criteria for Major Depression:

- depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day
- markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day
- significant weight loss or weight gain when not focusing on diet, or a decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day
- insomnia or hypersomnia (sleeping too much) nearly every day
- psychomotor agitation (restlessness) or retardation (lethargy) nearly every day
- fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day
- feelings of worthlessness, or excessive or inappropriate guilt nearly every day
- diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness nearly every day
- recurrent thoughts of death (not just fear of dying), recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, a suicide attempt or specific plan for committing suicide

Depression can be overwhelming and often requires treatment by a mental health professional. Treatment may include psychotherapy, medications and/or other options. If you feel you have symptoms of major depression, please be encouraged to discuss these symptoms with your physician or with a mental health professional of your choice.

Is There Hope?

Now that you have a better understanding of emotions, triggers that precipitate moodiness, and mood management tips, you might ask, “Is there a cure for the blues?”

I believe we are complex creatures who have been created with a range of emotions, but it’s far from a perfect world. Ultimately, the reason we have emotional turmoil here on earth dates back to biblical times. If you look in the very first book of the Bible (the book of Genesis), you’ll find that Adam and Eve, the very first people, chose to rebel against God who created them. As a result of their disobedience, the wrongs of sin and the trials of suffering were brought into this world. Moodiness (as well as more serious mental illnesses such as depression)—and all that goes with it—exists because of sin.

But I also believe that God, who created us and loves us as His own, has made a wonderful promise to each and every one of us. We find this promise in the Bible where we read, “*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose*” (Romans 8:28). In other words, God can use even our bad moods to draw us closer to Him and remind us how much He loves us.

I'm reminded of a story in the Bible about a young man named Joseph. He was victimized by his brothers, sold into slavery, and taken to a foreign country. While there, Joseph was falsely imprisoned—twice. Yet talents he had been given were discovered, and he ended up being second-in-command to the ruler and saving the country from famine.

What does this story have to do with bad moods, you ask? The Bible does not tell us specifically about Joseph's moods throughout his ordeal, but his trust that God would continue to care for him did not waver. Years later, he said to his brothers, *"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives"* (Genesis 50:20).

Things will go wrong—that's for certain. But when I read about Joseph (or turn to selected verses in the Bible) my negative thinking gets turned around. I realize that God will not abandon me just like He did not abandon Joseph through all his years of trouble. Joseph trusted, and I trust God to see me through it all too.

Another way to deal with bad moods is to read God's Word, the Bible, and to turn to passages of comfort. There are many verses that focus on God's love faithfulness and mercy that can be of great benefit when we are angry, upset or frustrated.

Through these words, God offers encouragement, hope and contentment, and helps us remember His promise to turn our trials into blessings.

Here are some verses from the Bible that offer comfort when bad moods are upon us:

- *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows"* (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

- *"The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters, He restores my soul.*

He guides me in paths of righteousness for His Name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever" (Psalm 23).

- *"I can do everything through Him who gives me strength"* (Philippians 4:13).
- *"Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you"* (1 Peter 5:7).
- *"But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint"* (Isaiah 40:31).

Although as humans, we must learn to live with bad moods and discontent, God's will for our lives is to trust Him and to lean on His promises. And the best promise of all is that He will always love us—no matter what.

I know this because He made the ultimate sacrifice for my benefit. It is impossible for me to live a perfect life, so God sent His Son, Jesus, to live one for me. Then Jesus, my Savior, took all the punishment I ever deserved and died for me. God gave His Son for me—that’s how much He loves me.

I don’t deserve it, but He loves me anyway. I don’t deserve it, but He forgives me. That’s called grace and He offers it to me every moment of every day—and He offers it to you.

Ultimately, it’s His love and forgiveness that sees me through the good moods and the bad ones. He helps me see beyond what I experience today to an eternal life with Him where there “*will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain*” (Revelation 21:4). I find I can “get a grip” because His grip on me will never let go!

If you’d like to know more about God’s grip of grace and love, call my friends at Lutheran Hour Ministries at 1-800-876-9880. They would love to tell you more!

+++++

¹ Gregory, Ian, M. D. and Smeltzer, Donald, M. A., *Psychiatry: Essentials of Clinical Practice* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 2nd edition, 1983), Chapter 2 – “Description and Classification.”

² Bootzin, Richard et al., *Psychology Today: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 5th Edition, 1983), Chapter 15 – “Emotions.”

³ Kaplan, Harold, M. D. & Sadock, Benjamin, M. D., *Synopsis of Psychiatry* (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 8th Edition, 1998), Chapter 7 – “Clinical Examination of the Psychiatric Patient.”

⁴ *Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-IV* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), Section on “Mood Disorders.”

Stephanie van Uft is board-certified in both adult and geriatric psychiatry and practices at Heartland Human Services in Effingham, Illinois. She lives with her husband, Carlo, in Greenville, Illinois, where she also serves as church organist and choir director. Besides working, Stephanie enjoys traveling, playing saxophone in community band, reading, and doing a variety of crafts.

*Check out LHM's online store
for a variety of ministry resources*

If you would like to get hard-copy booklets
of this item, you can do so by going to

<http://www.lhmgift.org/storefront/products.asp?by=topic&id=7>.

There you will find this and other **Project Connect** booklets,
with many titles in Spanish as well. Subjects like peace,
divorce, forgiveness, cancer, gambling, post-traumatic
stress disorder and loneliness are only a few of the topics
sensitively addressed in these concise, Christ-centered volumes.



Copyright © 2003 Lutheran Hour Ministries
Revised 2013

Lutheran Hour Ministries is a Christian outreach ministry supporting churches
worldwide in its mission of *Bringing Christ to the Nations-and the Nations to the Church*.

Unless noted otherwise, Scripture is taken from the HOLY BIBLE: NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV®,
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.
Capitalization of pronouns referring to the Deity has been added and is not part of the original New International Version text.