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Depression and behaviourism

Beating 'the blues' with activity

Andrew E .P. Mitchell explains how the behaviourist approach can be used to treat depression

Depression is a prolonged form of sadness. The symptoms include feeling 'down', irritable, angry, tired and bored (from DSM-5, using the provision for children and adolescents), and these can lead to frequent absences from school, and decreased interest and pleasure in activities. This resultant inactivity tends to make these feelings worse and can keep depression from going away.

When feeling this way, a person might start avoiding friends, neglecting responsibilities at home or school, which in turn can lead to feeling less confident and feeling that everything is getting on top of you. The person then starts to further withdraw from friends and activities that were once enjoyed and led to happiness. At this point, the

'unhealthy cycle' of prolonged sadness kicks in. The person then becomes locked into a 'downward spiral' of low mood which leads to a further reduction in activity, which then leads to feeling even worse. This depressive cycle is hard to break out of (see Figure 1).

Understanding depression

Although everyone will experience depression in their own way, people often say similar things about their experience. Young people with depression often say that depression affects three areas of their lives:

- 1 their thoughts or thinking
- 2 their behaviour or actions
- 3 their emotions or feelings


These three areas can affect and interact with each other. For example, if you had to do maths homework and had the *thought* 'I won't be able to do this' or 'I am rubbish at maths' then this will stop you taking the necessary actions or so-called *behaviours* to find the set homework and start to read what you need to do. If you decide this is too much effort and

THE PERSON BECOMES LOCKED INTO A 'DOWNWARD SPIRAL' OF LOW MOOD WHICH LEADS TO A FURTHER REDUCTION IN ACTIVITY, WHICH THEN LEADS TO FEELING EVEN WORSE

you'd rather avoid starting the homework and lie down on your bed instead, then you may start to feel worried and anxious that you haven't started the homework and this can make you feel *emotionally* upset.

Medical versus psychological models

People working in mental health often disagree about the exact causes of depression. Some experts believe that it is due to a low level of serotonin in the brain and therefore should be treated with anti-depressant medication (a medical model approach). Others believe that it is due to the way people see their world and their unhelpful thoughts in relation to events in their world, which can be treated with cognitive behaviour therapy

Signposts 

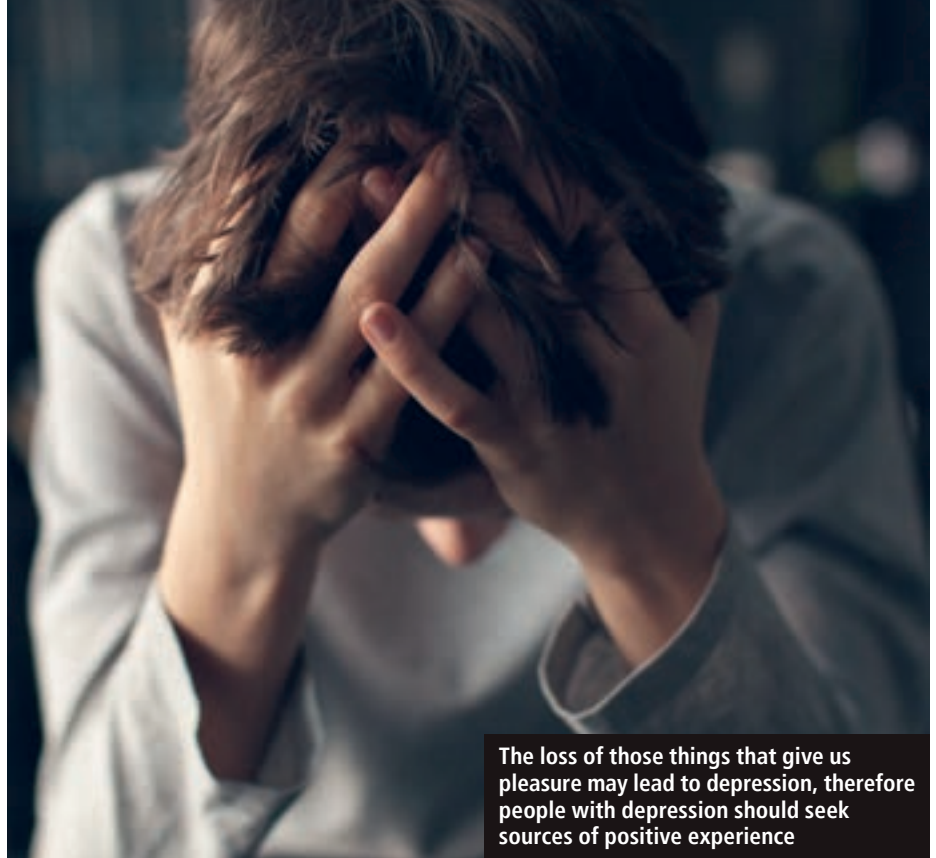
behaviourism, medical model, CBT, behavioural activation (BA)

(CBT). Yet other experts see it as a problem with a lack of activity and avoidance which triggers depression (Figure 2). Behaviourists believe that scheduling pleasant activity can help counteract this.

CBT is the most known and recommended treatment for children and adolescents with depression, along with other talking treatments (NICE 2015). However, there is not a 'one size fits all' treatment for all depression. For example, medication doesn't suit everyone due to side effects. Also, talking treatments like CBT tend to require a lot of training to deliver them well and tend to target thoughts which require attention and concentration. This can be difficult as these are negatively affected by depression itself.

Action precedes feelings

An action approach is based on behavioural theory, rather than the medical model. Behavioural theory dates back to the 1950s and the early writings of B. F. Skinner, who got people to focus on external factors in depression. The basic premise is that we are all sensitive to positive reinforcers, those things that give us pleasure, but when these are lost, the result is depression. To re-establish contact with positive reinforcers we should schedule activity to find lost sources of activity that can give us positive experiences. Basically, in order to beat the blues, we



The loss of those things that give us pleasure may lead to depression, therefore people with depression should seek sources of positive experience

need to 'act to a planned activity' rather than 'acting on how we feel at the time'.

Activating happiness

One way of overcoming depression is to increase your level of activity in a gradual way (Hershenberg 2017). The way to do this

is through something called 'behavioural activation' or 'BA' for short. It can be a treatment by itself, or can be used alongside other CBT skills, such as dealing with unhelpful thoughts. This is a treatment that is often used to help young people to beat depression, sometimes called 'beating the blues'. BA helps us understand how behaviours influence our feelings. It is a tried and tested technique for breaking free of the 'downward spiral' of unhelpful behaviours. Of course, it cannot be done in a few days, and may often require the help of others.

Breaking the cycle of depression

Here are a few suggestions for you to try. Remember, according to behaviourists the key to changing how people feel is helping them to change what they do.

Step 1

Notice the relationship between types of activities and your mood.

Our mood can be greatly affected by what we do, when, and with whom. The first thing to do is keep track of what activities you do.

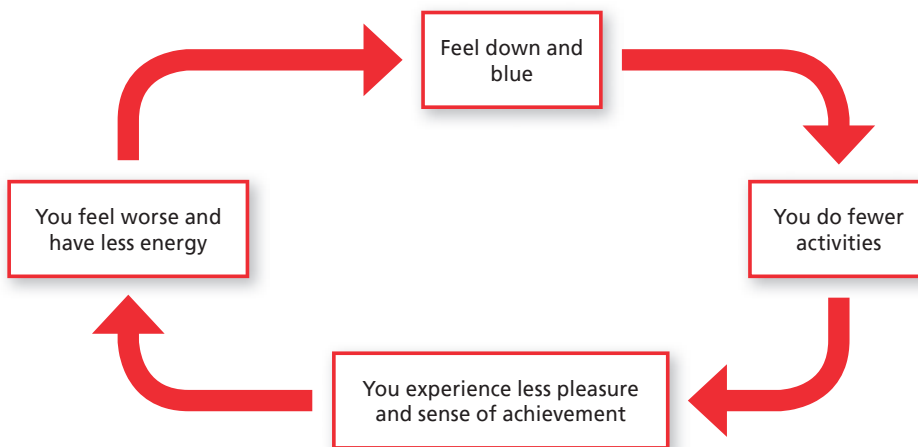


Figure 1 Downward spiral of low mood and reduced activity



Figure 2 Behavioural model of depression

BASICALLY, IN ORDER TO BEAT THE BLUES, WE NEED TO 'ACT TO A PLANNED ACTIVITY' RATHER THAN 'ACTING ON HOW WE FEEL AT THE TIME'

Social and sporting activities may give an 'up mood' that can be scheduled along with more achievement-based activities



THE KEY TO CHANGING HOW PEOPLE FEEL IS HELPING THEM TO CHANGE WHAT THEY DO

Write down the day, date and time in the form of a diary. Then rate the activity for enjoyment and achievement on a scale of 0 (none) to 10 (maximum). 'Up moods' score higher and 'down moods' score lower.

Step 2

Schedule more of the 'up moods' over the coming week.

Try looking at the week ahead and arrange at least a few activities that are likely to encourage enjoyment and feelings of achievement and, where possible, make the plans with a friend. Look at the list of activities in step 1 and identify those with a higher 'up mood' rating for enjoyment, such as going to the cinema with a friend or making a start on something you have been putting off. These activities will give you a sense of achievement. The key is to start with easy tasks and build up in small steps over time. This way you will slowly gain a sense of pleasure and/or achievement with each step.

Step 3

Balance pleasurable activities and achievement-based activities.

Pleasurable activities are those that are most sustainable over time and involve such things as hobbies or recreational activities, such as sports. Social activities, with friends or family, can also involve pleasure. As far as possible, try to include at least one activity that may not give an immediate feeling of pleasure but may at some point provide a sense of achievement. Doing activities that give you a sense of achievement will help you feel like you are starting to get back on 'top of things' again. Therefore, when you start that homework that you have been putting off, it may not give an instant sense of happiness but might give you a sense of achievement and may indeed prompt you to do more. It is important to maintain a healthy balance of both pleasurable and achievement-based activities.

Step 4

Reward yourself.

Depression and self-doubt try to take away the sense of accomplishment and 'pat on the back' we deserve when we achieve something.

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We sometimes don't give ourselves permission to celebrate our achievements, however small or big they might seem to us. Make an effort to reward yourself. Most importantly you'll discover that these seemingly small changes will actually change the way you feel.

Pulling it all together

BA has emerged as a strong and promising treatment. BA is a structured treatment, which aims to activate people in ways that will increase rewarding experiences. It challenges the idea that medication is required to treat moderate to severe depression and the idea that directly modifying thoughts is necessary. The effects of BA alone can be a more cost-effective treatment, due to the less intensive training required to deliver BA, and has similar effectiveness as CBT for depression in adults (Richards et al. 2016). However, further research is needed to examine the acceptability, feasibility and effectiveness of BA with children and adolescents (McCauley et al. 2016).

Andrew E. P. Mitchell is an associate professor at University of Chester, with an interest in psychological treatments and mood disorders.