

Why
Has
Nobody
Told
Me
This
Before?



DR JULIE SMITH



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About the Author

DR JULIE SMITH has over ten years' experience as a clinical psychologist and was the first professional to use TikTok to give insights on therapy. After running her own private practice, Julie launched her TikTok channel with the mission of making top-quality mental health education accessible to all. During the COVID-19 pandemic, her audience grew astronomically to 3 million followers as users related to the bite-sized self-help videos she was sharing and put her advice into practice. Those videos have clocked up around half a billion views across her platforms. She was named by TikTok as one of its Top 100 creators.

Julie has appeared in two BBC films as well as on CBBC, Good Morning Britain, BBC Breakfast and CNN International. She is the BBC Radio 1 Life Hacks psychologist and has been featured by Women's Health, BuzzFeed, the Telegraph, The Times, the Mail on Sunday, Glamour, CNN and more. Julie lives in Hampshire, England, with her husband and three children.

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For Matthew.

*If mine is the ink then yours is the paper. Like all
our adventures we got here together.*

Introduction

I'm sitting in my therapy room across from a young woman. She is relaxed in the chair, her arms open and loosely moving as she speaks to me. A transformation from the tension and nerves of her first session. We have only had a dozen appointments. She looks into my eyes and starts to nod and smile as she says, 'You know what? I know it's going to be hard, but I know I can do it.'

My eyes sting and I swallow. The smile sweeps across every muscle in my face. She has felt the shift and, now, so have I. She came into this room, some time ago, fearful of the world and everything she had to face. Pervasive self-doubt led her to feel dread for every new change and challenge. She left therapy that day with her head held a little higher. Not because of me. I have no magical ability to heal anyone or change their life. She had not needed years of therapy that unravelled her childhood. In this situation, as in many others, the major part of my role was as an educator. I passed on insights about what the science says and what has worked for others. Once she understood and started using the concepts and skills, a transformation began. She felt hope for the future. She started to believe in her own strength. She started dealing with difficult situations in healthy new ways. Each time she did, confidence in her ability to cope grew a bit more.

As we revisited the things she needed to remember in order to face the week ahead, she nodded, looked at me and asked, 'Why has nobody told me this before?'

Those words stayed with me, ringing in my head. She was not the first or the last person to say them. The same scenario repeated itself over and over. Individuals were coming along to therapy believing that

their strong painful emotions were the result of a fault in their brain or personality. They did not believe they had any power to influence them. While longer-term, more in-depth therapy is appropriate for some people, there were so many who simply needed some education about how their mind and body work and how they could manage their mental health day-to-day.

I knew the catalyst was not me, it was the knowledge they were being introduced to. But people should not have to pay to come and see someone like me just to get access to that education about how their mind works. Sure, the information is out there. But in a sea of misinformation, you have to know what you are looking for.

I started campaigning into my poor husband's ear about how things should be different. 'OK, go for it,' he said. 'Put some videos on YouTube or something.'

So we did. Together we started making videos talking about mental health. As it turned out, I was not the only one who wanted to talk about this stuff. Before I knew it, I was making almost daily videos for millions of followers across social media. But the platforms where I could reach the most people seemed to be those with short-form videos. This means I have a large collection of videos with no longer than 60 seconds to get my point across.

While I have been able to catch people's attention, share some insights and get them talking about mental health, I still want to go one step further. When you make a 60-second video there is so much that you have to leave out. So much detail that gets missed. So, here it is. The detail. The ins and outs of how I might explain some of these concepts in a therapy session and some simple guidance on how to use them, step by step.

The tools in this book are mostly taught in therapy, but they are not therapy skills. They are life skills. Tools that can help every single one of us to navigate through difficult times and to flourish.

In this book, I will break down the things I have learned as a psychologist and gather together all of the most valuable knowledge,

wisdom and practical techniques I have come across that have changed my life and those of the people I have worked with. This is the place to get clarity on emotional experience and a clear idea of what to do about it.

When we understand a little about how our minds work and we have some guideposts on how to deal with our emotions in a healthy way, we not only build resilience, but we can thrive and, over time, find a sense of growth.

Before leaving their first therapy session, many people want some sort of tool they can take home and start using to ease their distress. For this reason, this book is not about delving into your childhood and working out how or why you came to struggle. There are other great books for that. But, in therapy, before we can expect anyone to work on healing any past traumas, we must ensure they have the tools in place to build resilience and the ability to tolerate distressing emotions safely. There is such power in understanding the many ways you can influence how you feel and nurture good mental health.

This book is all about doing just that.

This book is not therapy, in the same way that a book about how to maximize your physical health is not medicine. It is a toolbox filled to the brim with different tools for different jobs. You cannot master how to use them all at the same time, so you don't need to try. Pick the section that fits with the challenges you face right now, and spend time applying those ideas. Every skill takes time to become effective, so give it a chance and plenty of repetition before you discard any of the tools. You cannot build a house with just one tool. Each task requires something slightly different. And however skilled you get at using those tools, some challenges are just much harder than others.

To me, working on maximizing our mental health is no different to working on our physical health. If you put health on a number scale with zero as neutral – not unwell but not thriving – a number below zero would indicate a health problem and any number above zero

would indicate good health. In the last few decades it has become acceptable and even fashionable to work on maximizing your physical health through nutrition and exercise. Only more recently has it become acceptable to openly and visibly work on your mental health. This means you don't need to wait until you're struggling before you pick up this book, because it is OK to build upon your mental health and resilience, even if you are not unwell or struggling right now. When you feed your body with good nutrition and build up stamina and strength with regular exercise, you know that your body is more able to fight infection and heal when faced with injury. It's just the same with mental health. The more work we do on building self-awareness and resilience when all is well, the better able we are to face life's challenges when they come our way.

If you pick a skill from this book and find it useful, in hard times don't stop practising that skill when everything starts to improve. Even when you are feeling good and don't think you need it, these skills are nutrition for your mind. It's like paying a mortgage rather than rent. You are investing in your future health.

The things included in this book have a research evidence base. But I do not rest on that alone. I also know they can help because I have seen them help, time and time again, for real people. There is hope. With some guidance and self-awareness, struggle can build strength.

When you start to share things on social media or you write a self-help book, lots of people get the impression that you have it all sorted. I have seen a lot of authors in the self-help industry perpetuate this idea. They feel they have to look as if the things life throws at them leave no dents or scars. They suggest that their book contains the answers – all the answers you will ever need in life. Let me demystify that one right now.

I am a psychologist. That means I have read a lot of the research that has been produced on this subject and I have been trained to use it to help guide other people in their quest towards positive change. I am also a human. The tools I have acquired do not stop life throwing stuff

at you. They help you to navigate, swerve, take a hit and get back up. They don't stop you getting lost along the way. They help you to notice when you have lost your way and bravely turn on your heel and head back towards a life that feels meaningful and purposeful to you. This book is not the key to a problem-free life. It is a great bunch of tools that helps me and many others find our way through.

The journey so far ...

I am not a guru who has all the answers to the universe. This book is part journal, part guide. In some ways I have always been on a personal quest to discover how it all pieces together. So this book is me making use of all those hours spent reading, writing and speaking with real humans in therapy to understand a bit more about being human and what helps us while we are here. This is only the journey so far. I continue to learn and be amazed by people I meet. Scientists keep asking better questions and discovering better answers. So here is my collection of the most important things I have learned *so far* that have helped both me and the people I work with in therapy to find our way through human struggle.

So this book is not necessarily going to ensure that you live the rest of your days with a smile on your face. It will let you know which tools you can use to make sure that when you do smile, it is because you genuinely feel something. It will describe the tools you need to keep re-evaluating and finding your direction, returning to healthier habits and self-awareness.

Tools might look great in the box. But they only help when you get them out and start practising how to use them. Each tool takes regular practice. If you miss the nail with the hammer this time, come back later and try again. As a fellow human being, I too continue to do this, and I have only included techniques and skills that I have tried and found useful both for myself and for the individuals I have worked with.

This book is a resource for me as much as it is for you. I will keep returning to it time and time again whenever I feel I need to. My wish is that you will do the same and that it can be a toolbox for life.

1

On
Dark
Places

CHAPTER 1

Understanding low mood

Everyone has low days.

Everyone.

But we all differ in how frequent the low days are and how severe the low mood.

Something that I have come to realize over the years of working as a psychologist is how much people struggle with low mood and never tell a soul. Their friends and family would never know. They mask it, push it away and focus on meeting expectations. Sometimes people arrive at therapy after years of doing that.

They feel like they're getting something wrong. They compare themselves to the people who appear to have it all together all of the time. The ones who are always smiling and apparently full of energy.

They buy into the idea that some people are just like that and happiness is some sort of personality type. You either have it or you don't.

If we see low mood as purely a fault in the brain, we don't believe we can change it, so instead we get to work on hiding it. We go about the day, doing all the right things, smiling at all the right people, yet all the time feeling a bit empty and dragged down by that low mood, not enjoying things in the way we are told we should.

Take a moment to notice your body temperature. You might feel perfectly comfortable, or you may be too hot or too cold. While changes in how hot or cold you feel could be a sign of infection and illness, it could just as easily be a signal of things around you. Maybe

you forgot your jacket, which is normally enough to protect you from the cold. Perhaps the sky has clouded over and it has started to rain. Maybe you are hungry or dehydrated. When you run for the bus you notice you warm up. Our body temperature is affected by our environment, both internal and external, and we also have the power to influence it ourselves. Mood is much the same. When we experience low mood, it may have been influenced by several factors from our internal and external world, but when we understand what those influences are, we can use that knowledge to shift it in the direction we want it to go. Sometimes the answer is to grab an extra layer and run for the bus. Sometimes it's something else.

Something that the science has been confirming to us, and something people often learn in therapy, is that we have more power to influence our emotions than we thought.

This means we get to start working on our own wellbeing and taking our emotional health into our own hands. It reminds us that our mood is not fixed and it does not define who we are; it is a sensation we experience.

This doesn't mean we can eradicate low mood or depression. Life still presents us with hardship, pain and loss and that will always be reflected in our mental and physical health. Instead, it means we can build up a toolbox with things that help. The more we practise using those tools, the more skilled we get at using them. So when life throws us problems that hammer our mood into the ground we have something to turn to.

The concepts and skills covered are for us all. Research shows them to be helpful for those with depression, but they are not a controlled drug that you need a prescription for. They are life skills. Tools that we can all use as we go through life facing fluctuations in mood, big and small. For anyone who experiences severe and enduring mental illness it is always optimal to learn new skills with the support of a professional.

How feelings get created

Sleep is bliss. Then my alarm offends my ears. It's too loud and I hate that tune. It sends a shockwave through my body that I am not ready for. I press snooze and lie back down. My head is aching and I feel irritated. I press snooze again. If we don't get up soon the kids will be late for school. I need to get ready for my meeting. I close my eyes and see the to-do list lying on my desk in the office. Dread. Irritation. Exhaustion. I don't want to do today.

Is this low mood? Did it come from my brain? How did I wake up like this? Let's trace back. Last night I stayed up late working. By the time I got into bed I was too tired to go back downstairs to grab a glass of water. Then my baby woke up twice in the night. I haven't slept enough and I'm dehydrated. The loud alarm woke me from a deep sleep, sending stress hormones shooting through my body as I woke up. My heart started pounding and that felt something like stress.

Each of these signals sends information to my brain. We are not OK. So my brain goes on a hunt for reasons why. It searches, it finds. So my physical discomfort, brought about by lack of sleep and dehydration, helped to create low mood.

Not all low mood is unidentified dehydration, but when dealing with mood it is essential to remember that it's not all in your head. It's also in your body state, your relationships, your past and present, your living conditions and lifestyle. It's in everything you do and don't do, in your diet and your thoughts, your movements and memories. How you feel is not simply a product of your brain.

Your brain is constantly working to make sense of what is going on. But it only has a certain number of clues to work from. It takes information from your body (e.g. heart rate, breathing, blood pressure, hormones). It takes information from each of your senses – what you can see, hear, touch, taste and smell. It takes information from your actions and thoughts. It pieces all these clues together with memories of when you have felt similar in the past and makes a suggestion, a best

guess about what is happening and what you do about it. That guess can sometimes be felt as an emotion or a mood. The meaning we make of that emotion and how we respond to it, in turn, sends information back to the body and the mind about what to do next (Feldman Barrett, 2017). So when it comes to changing your mood, the ingredients that go in will determine what comes out.

The two-way road

Lots of self-help books tell us to get our mindset right. They tell us, 'What you think will change how you feel.' But they often miss something crucial. It doesn't end there. The relationship works both ways. The way you feel also influences the types of thoughts that can pop into your head, making you more vulnerable to experiencing thoughts that are negative and self-critical. Even when we know our thought patterns aren't helping, it is so incredibly hard to think differently when we feel down, and even harder to follow the rule of 'only positive thoughts' that is often suggested on social media. The mere presence of those negative thoughts does not mean that they came first and caused the low mood. So thinking differently may not be the only answer.

How we think is not the whole picture. Everything we do and don't do influences our mood too. When you feel down, all you want to do is hide away. You don't feel like doing any of the things you normally enjoy, and so you don't. But disengaging from those things for too long makes you feel even worse. The loop also occurs with our physical state. Let's say you have been too busy to exercise for a few weeks. You feel tired and low in mood, so exercising is the last thing you want to do. The longer you avoid the exercise, the more you feel lethargic and low on energy. When you are low on energy, the chance of exercising goes down, along with your mood. Low mood gives you the urge to do the things that make mood worse.

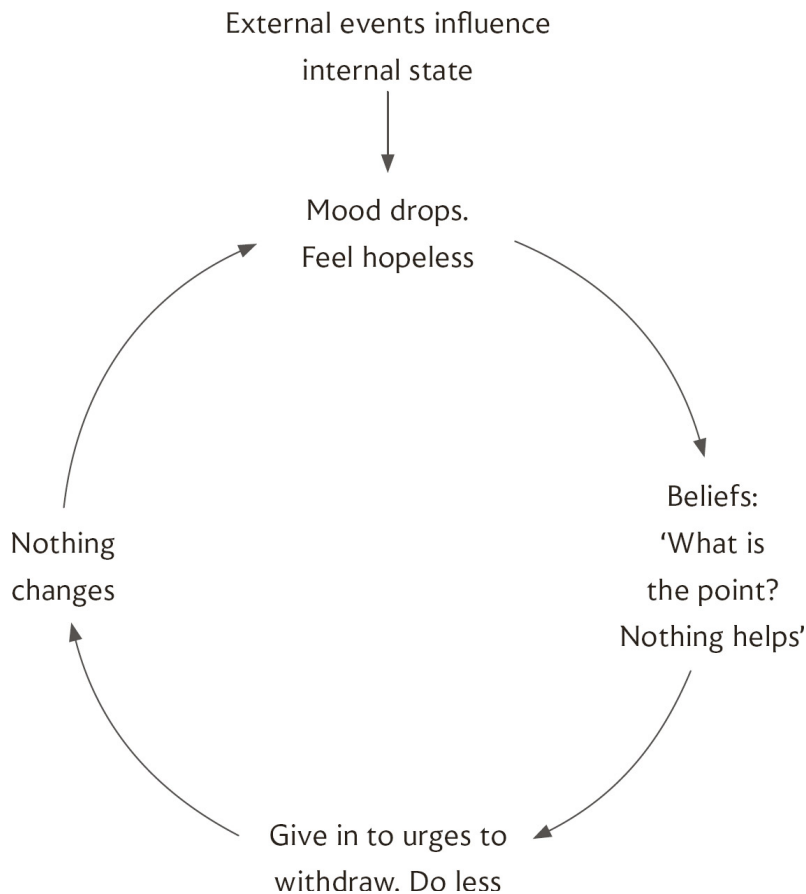


Figure 1: The downward spiral of low mood. How a few days of low mood can spiral into depression. Breaking the cycle is easier to do if we recognize it early and act on it. Adapted from Gilbert (1997).

So we get into these vicious cycles easily because all the different aspects of our experience are impacting each other. But while this shows us how we can get stuck in a rut, it also shows us the way out.

All these things are interacting to create our experience. But we don't experience our thoughts, bodily sensations, emotions and actions all separately. We experience them together as one. Like wicker strands woven together, it's hard to notice each one individually. We just experience the basket as a whole. That is why we need to get practised at breaking it down. When we do that we can more easily see what changes we could make. [Figure 2](#) shows a simple way to break down your experience.

When we break things down in this way, we can start to recognize not only what we do that keeps us stuck but also what we do that helps.

Most people come to therapy knowing that they want to feel different. They have some unpleasant (sometimes excruciating) feelings they don't want to have any more and are missing some of the more enriching emotions (such as joy and excitement) that they would like to feel more of. We can't just press a button and produce our desired set of emotions for the day. But we do know that how we feel is closely entwined with the state of our body, the thoughts we spend time with and our actions. Those other parts of our experience are the ones that we can influence and change. The constant feedback between the brain, the body and our environment means that we can use those to influence how we feel.

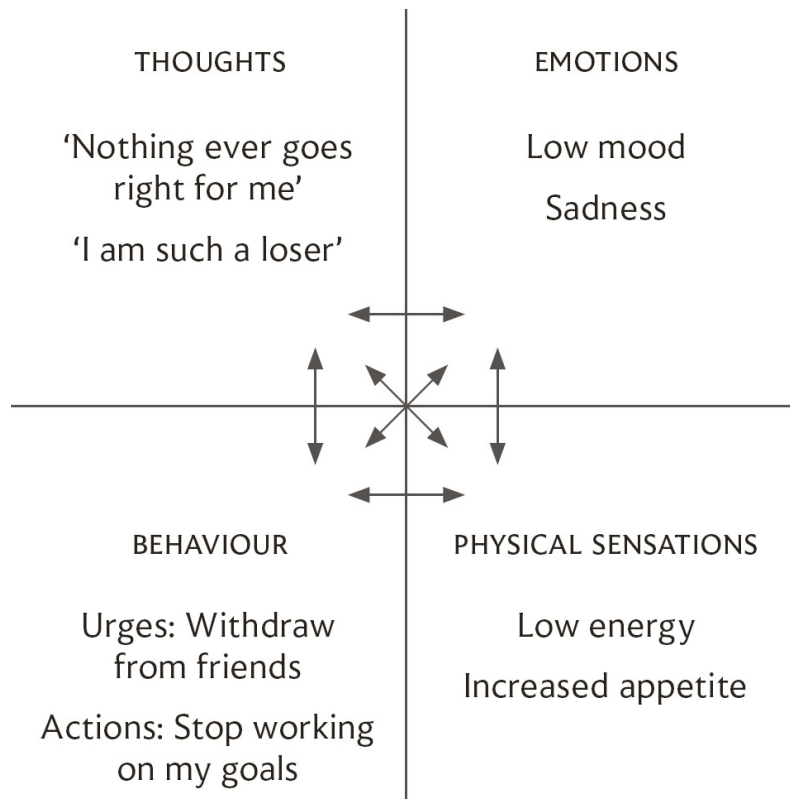


Figure 2: Spending time with negative thoughts makes it highly likely that I will feel low in mood. But feeling low in mood also makes me more vulnerable to having more negative thoughts. This shows us how we get stuck in cycles of low mood. But it also shows us the way out. Adapted from Greenberger & Padesky (2016).

Where to start

The first step to begin getting a grasp on low mood is to build our awareness of each aspect of the experience. This simply means noticing each one. This awareness starts off with hindsight. We look back on the day and choose moments to look at in detail. Then, with time and practice, that builds our ability to notice them in the moment. This is where we get the opportunity to change things.

In therapy I might ask someone with low mood to notice where they feel it in their body. They might notice that they feel tired and lethargic or lose their appetite. They might also notice that when they feel low

they have thoughts like, 'I don't feel like doing anything today. I am so lazy. I'll never be successful. What a loser.' They might have the urge to go back to hide in the bathroom at work for a while and scroll through social media.

Once you get familiar with what is going on inside your own body and mind, you can then expand that awareness to looking at what is going on in your environment and your relationships and the impact that is having on your internal experience and behaviour. Take your time getting to know the details. *When I am feeling this, what am I thinking about? When I am feeling this, what state is my body in? How was I looking after myself in the days or hours leading up to this feeling? Is this an emotion or just physical discomfort from an unmet need?* There are lots of questions. Sometimes the answers will be clear. Other times it will all feel too complex. That is OK. Continuing to explore and write down experiences will help to build up self-awareness about what makes things better and what makes things worse.



Toolkit: Reflect on what is contributing to your low mood

Use the cross-sectional formulation (see [Figure 2, page 16](#)) to practise the skill of picking up on the different aspects of experiences, both positive and negative. You'll find a blank formulation on [page 347](#) that you can fill in yourself. Take 10 minutes and pick a moment from that day to reflect on. You may notice that some boxes are easier to fill than the others.

Reflecting on moments after they happen will help to gradually build up the skill of noticing the links between those aspects of your experience as they happen.



Try this: You can use these prompts to help you fill in the formulation. Or you can simply use these as journal prompts.

- What was happening in the lead up to the moment you are reflecting on?
- What was happening just before you noticed the new feeling?
- What were your thoughts at the time?
- What were you focusing your attention on?
- What emotions were present?
- Where did you feel that in your body?
- What other physical sensations did you notice?
- What urges appeared for you?
- Did you act on those urges?
- If not, what did you do instead?
- How did your actions influence the emotions?
- How did your actions influence your thoughts and beliefs about the situation?

Chapter summary

- Mood fluctuation is normal. Nobody is happy all the time. But we don't have to be at the mercy of it either. There are things we can do that help.
- Feeling down is more likely to reflect unmet needs than a brain malfunction.
- Each moment of our lives can be broken down into the different aspects of our experience.
- Those things all influence each other. It shows us how we get stuck in a downward spiral of low mood or even depression.
- Our emotions are constructed through a number of things we can influence.
- We cannot directly choose our emotions and switch them on but we can use the things we can control to change how we feel.
- Using the cross-sectional formulation (see [Figure 2, page 16](#)) helps to increase awareness of what is impacting on our mood and keeping us stuck.

CHAPTER 2

Mood pitfalls to watch out for

The problem with instant relief

Low mood gives us the urge to do things that can make our mood even worse. When we feel discomfort and the threat of low mood, we want to get back to feeling lighter. Our brain already knows from experience what tends to help the quickest. So we feel urges to do whatever will make it all go away as soon as possible. We numb or distract ourselves, and push the feelings away. For some that is via alcohol, drugs or food. For others it is watching hours of TV or scrolling through social media. Each of those things are so inviting because they work – in the short term. They give us that instant distraction and numbing that we crave. That is, until we switch off the TV, close down the app, or sober up, and then the feelings come back. Each time we go round that cycle the feelings come back even more intense.

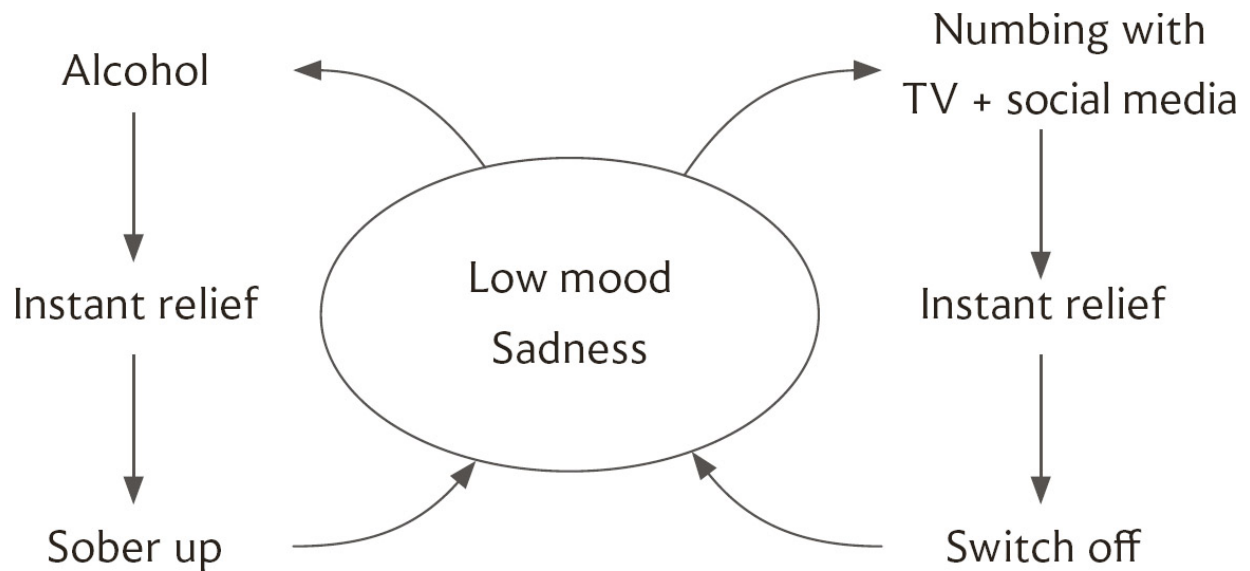


Figure 3: The vicious cycle of instant relief. Adapted from the work of Isabel Clark (2017).

Finding ways to manage low mood involves reflecting on the ways in which we respond to those feelings, having compassion for our human need for relief, while also being honest with ourselves about which of those attempts to cope are making things worse in the longer term. Often the things that work best in the long term are not fast-acting.



Try this: Use these questions as journal prompts to help you reflect on your current coping strategies for low mood.

- When feeling low, what are your go-to responses?
- Do those responses provide instant relief from the pain and discomfort?
- What effect do they have in the long term?
- What do they cost you? (Not in money, but in time, effort, health, progress.)

Thought patterns that make you feel worse