

Blue Busters: How to Break the Depressive Loop

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Understanding How Depression Works: The Depressive Loop

Let's begin with a very important principle. People who are prone to depression find that when they experience stress (social, financial, and health), their body reacts by altering the neurochemicals involved in producing motivation, energy, and the anticipation of pleasure. As a result, they stop doing things and withdraw from life. The result is four-fold:

- First, because you have withdrawn from many positive sources of reinforcement, your life starts to feel meaningless and worthless.
- Second, because you've stopped engaging in these activities, your brain says ("Hey, if you aren't going to use the activating chemicals, then I'm going to stop producing them"). So, you feel worse (in the long run) than when you started.
- Third, your stress increases when you stop doing things and disengage from life. For example, your spouse, kids, boss, parents, etc., are more likely to be angry, critical, and unsupportive. Friends will assume you don't want to be around them or that you've blown them off (rather than think you are lonely and depressed and need encouragement and support), so they stop calling or coming around.
- Fourth, you are left isolated, alone in your bed (on the couch or in a recliner), ruminating about all your problems and how miserable your life has become. You also may start to worry, "what-if" this happens, or that happens, and anxiety appears alongside your depressed mood and depleted energy. And then helplessness creeps into your mind, whispering thoughts about how you are incapable of doing anything to make things better, and helplessness' close cousin hopelessness chimes in and says matter-of-factly, "So why try! Nothing will ever change; you are trapped and there's no way out."
- Finally, because no one wants to be trapped in a dungeon of misery and darkness, suicidal thoughts begin nibbling at the edge of your consciousness. The idea that you could escape all this pain and suffering may become more prominent, and you might even fantasize and plan ways to do it. This is the final strategy of depression: total self-destruction—death.

Through the science of emotion regulation, we have discovered that we can reverse this process (on every level) by increasing behavior activation. In other words, by challenging yourself to take one small step at a time, you can begin to change the way you feel. Here is how it works.

There are 3 things you need to be happy:

1. You need things to do things that you experience as meaningful in that they give you a sense of accomplishment or enjoyment.
2. You need things to look forward to. This usually involves some degree of planning. So, for example, if you have scheduled some work to be done, like cleaning out a messy closet or washing your car, you also plan a pleasant activity to reward yourself.
3. You need people to do things with. Some of the activities you have in the other two categories, you might do with other people. You might work on a project together, play golf or tennis, or go on a walk together. You might ask an old friend to dinner, lunch, or coffee.

When depression sets in, all these things begin to fade away. Why? Usually, because depression tricks you into believing that because you do not feel motivated or you no longer anticipate pleasant experiences, it means you

cannot do them, or there is no reason to do them. Consequently, you stop doing those activities. And the less you do, the less you want to do.

There is a neurobiological reason for this. Your brain rewards you for engaging in behaviors that reflect your values: In other words, behaviors that give you a sense of accomplishment, pleasure, and relational connectedness. When you stop engaging in these behaviors, your brain goes on strike and stops producing the chemicals you need to feel energized and motivated and anticipate pleasure. So, the less you do, the less you feel like doing. The less you feel like doing things, the less you do. This is the depressive loop. It's a vicious cycle, a trap of the mind, and the consequences can be debilitating.

At the very heart of the depressive loop is the tendency for a person to behave in a mood-dependent manner. In other words, your behavior is driven by how you feel. On one level, this kind of behavior can be very adaptive, especially when you feel good. You look forward to spending time with friends and ask them to come over for a cookout. You feel motivated to go for a nice walk, so you put on your shoes and walk. If you see a black bear in the woods and you high-tail in the opposite direction, that's a good move. But there are times when this mode of acting on your feelings can create problems. For example, if you're angry with someone and you curse them out or punch them in the face. Just because you're angry doesn't mean you can act on it without negative consequences. For those struggling with depression, they are likely to act on how they feel. So, if you don't feel like going to work, you call in sick. Or, if you don't feel motivated to study for a test, you go to bed instead. Or, if you feel a sense of dread when it comes time to balance your checkbook, you flip on Netflix and binge-watch 6 episodes of Friends instead. You might feel a little relief in each of these examples, but in the short term, you feel even worse in the long term. You might even convince yourself that you "can't do" something unless you first feel like doing it. This is one of the biggest dirty tricks of depression. You slowly become a slave to your feelings. The key to breaking this cycle is through the process of learning (or re-learning) how to align your behaviors with your values/commitments. Through this process, you'll learn how to change the way you feel through your behaviors rather than allowing your feelings always to drive your behaviors.

Keep in mind that this is a process of learning or re-learning. So, we start slowly and build from where we are, one step at a time.

How to Break the Depressive Loop

The key to breaking this vicious cycle is leveraging our understanding of the brain's workings. Remember, when you do things that reflect your core values, your brain rewards you with neurochemicals that make you feel good (i.e., generate feelings of accomplishment, enjoyment, and a sense of meaningfulness). That's right, there is a connection between your values and your neurobiology. We could spend a whole series of podcasts talking about how your brain is linked to your values system and how your brain is designed to supply the chemicals you need to feel motivated to pursue meaningful outcomes. But for now, let's keep it simple. We can break the depressive loop by helping you identify behaviors or activities that reflect your values and then teach you how to manually jumpstart your brain to produce the chemicals you need to feel good again.

Step 1. Activity Selection.

Pleasant Activities: Think back to some periods in your life when you were not depressed. Better yet, think back to times when you felt good. When was this in your life? Be specific: where were you? What were you doing? Who were you with? Write down some of the things that you were doing. It's unlikely that you were lying on the couch watching TV for long periods of time by yourself. It's unlikely that you were sitting in your recliner, ruminating about all your problems and shortcomings. Instead, you were probably doing something that was meaningful to you. Moreover, it is likely that you were doing something with someone else you enjoyed being with.

If, for some reason, you can't think of anything you used to do and enjoyed, it is no big deal. One of the ways depression affects people is that it blocks their ability to access memories that are inconsistent with the way they feel. So, one possibility is that you might talk to someone you know, who remembers when you were not depressed.

Ask them what they remember you doing back then. Ask them if they can remember things that you liked doing and people you liked spending time with. Take a notepad and write down what they say.

You can also jog your memory about things you used to enjoy by reviewing the pleasant events checklist attached to this form. Review all the items and see if they remind you of things you've done in the past that you enjoyed. If you still can't remember any activity or people you used to enjoy, consider choosing some of the pleasant activities from the checklist and trying them out using this procedure.

Responsibilities: Next, identify some responsibilities you've been putting off: paying bills, putting away laundry, cleaning windows, straightening the living room, painting the front door, returning emails, etc. The key is to break larger tasks into smaller, bite-sized steps. If you want to clean your garage, you'll never have the time, energy, or motivation to do it all at once (this is one of the dirty tricks depression uses to feed procrastination). Instead, break it into smaller steps, each taking no more than 15-20 minutes. If you want to start exercising, start small: plan to go walking for 15 minutes (7.5 minutes in one direction, 7.5 minutes back). See how you feel after you've completed 15 minutes. If you're gassed, discontinue and tell yourself, "Good job." If you feel more motivated and energized, do another 15 minutes. If you have dozens of emails to read and respond to, set a goal to return 10 or 15. Again, if you are too overwhelmed or worn out after that, discontinue and give yourself an "attaboy or attagirl."

Remember, these are little experiments where you are learning how to jumpstart your energy and motivation. Once you master this skill; once you learn how to prime your motivational/energy pump, depression will lose its grip on your life.

Step 2: Schedule It.

Pick a specific time to do the activity. We strongly suggest you schedule it. Put in on your calendar and treat it like an important appointment. Why do this? Because when people are depressed, they are typically duped into thinking something like this, "I will do it as soon as I feel motivated to do it." We know, of course, that time never comes. So, if you schedule it as an appointment, you do it whether you feel like it or not. Like virtually no one says, "Hey, I think I'll go to the doctor now; I've really been looking forward to this." Instead, they just go because it's a scheduled appointment.

Step 3: Make a Prediction.

One of the dirty tricks of depression is it convinces you that nothing will help you feel better. It does this by making automatic predictions, telling you, "You can't do that...you don't have the energy or the motivation." Or "No sense doing that, you won't enjoy it." This happens so automatically that people don't even notice it's happening. They just know they don't feel like doing anything. So, we have found that intentionally making a prediction before you start the activity helps you learn how to become more realistic about making these predictions. The last thing depression wants you to do is become more realistic. Another dirty trick of depression

Keep in Mind

After you have picked out a few items to try, then choose just one activity to start with. If you are feeling overwhelmed or completely unmotivated, that is fine. If you don't have high expectations for how well this activity might work, that's fine too. We want to look at this assignment as an experiment. We are testing the validity of the negative thoughts common to nearly all forms of depression. Here are some classic examples:

- "Nothing I do will make me feel any better"
- "I can't get any pleasure out of anything because my life sucks and I'm just a boring person"
- "If I don't feel like doing something then it means I won't enjoy it if I do it"
- "If I don't feel like doing something I can't make myself do it."
- "If I don't feel motivated to do something (e.g., clean my house, exercise, pursue some goal) it means I no longer value that activity"

These are just thoughts.
Let's test them out.

is that it lures you into thinking in all-or-nothing, black-and-white categories: “Either you will love it or you will hate it; and since you never love anything, you are going to hate this. So why do it? You will just feel worse.” If you buy into this kind of thinking, depression will tighten its grip on you.

Step 4: Do What You Planned.

Another dirty trick of depression is to convince you that you can’t do anything without motivation. This is a vicious lie. As we noted earlier, you can do anything for 10-15 minutes without any motivation (as long as it is within your skill set). When people aren’t depressed, they do things without motivation all the time. Hardly no one wakes up in the morning and says, “Yes! I can’t wait to get to work and start doing my job. I’m so excited...Yahoo! Let’s go!” Instead, they drag themselves out of bed, stumble into the bathroom, do their business, take a shower, brush their teeth, comb their hair, put on make-up (if that’s your thing), and get on with their day. They realize that after they get some coffee, make it to work and get into their job, their motivation will come. The dirty trick of depression is that motivation comes before action. The reality is that motivation comes after action. So, whatever you have planned, don’t ask, “Am I motivated to do this?” It’s the wrong question. Instead, tell yourself, “It’s time. Go do it, one step at a time.” After completing the assignment, you can see if your motivation gage has moved in the right direction. If so, great. You can keep going. If not, give yourself some credit for doing something without motivation. That, in and of itself, is a big deal.

Step 5: Rate Your Experience

After you complete whatever activity you planned, whether it’s a responsibility or a pleasant event, then rate the experience using the guidelines below.

Pay attention to Positive Experiences

Yet another dirty trick of depression is to automatically direct your attention to negative experiences, to look at things in the most negative light. It’s like you have a CNN editor in your brain that drives you to seek out and report on only negative stories and ignore positive ones.

To break out of this viscous thought trap, we have people focus on two areas: (1) A sense of accomplishment/satisfaction (A) and a sense of enjoyment/pleasure (E). The first, (A), is about feeling like you did something that needed to be done. You may not have enjoyed the process, but after you were done, you felt like you accomplished something and were satisfied with the result. You’re more likely to generate A from doing activities on your Responsibilities list. The second (E) is about the positive feelings you might experience when you are doing something from your Pleasant Activities list.

Shades of Grey

Now that you know what to pay attention to, we want to help you think in shades of grey. We do this by having you rate your experiences of accomplishment and enjoyment on a scale of 0-5. A zero means you got nothing out of the experience, and 5 means you got the most you could expect **for that experience**. Why do we emphasize “for that experience?” The reason is this: I once had a patient do this assignment, and she chose to soak in a hot bath full of bubbles. She rated the experience as a “2.” I asked her if she liked soaking in a hot bath, and she said, “Yeah, but it’s not like going to a high-class spa with hot tubs, steam saunas, aroma rooms, and a nice comfortable chair by the pool.”

“You’re right,” I said, “How much pleasure do you get out of a high-class spa like that?”

“Oh, I loved going to the spa and treating myself to all those different amenities. It was even better if I also signed up for a massage. Then I got to use the spa before the massage and for hours afterward. And stay there most of the day. But I can’t afford that anymore, and nothing else compares.”

I asked, “How much pleasure would you get from doing a ‘spa day’ like that back when you could afford it?”

“I’d give it a 5. It was the best.”

“Okay, good.” I said, “And given that your bathtub at home can never compare to what you might get at an expensive spa in Las Vegas, how much pleasure do you think you could possibly get out of it, using the same scale?”

“I don’t know, maybe a 1 or 2 at best.”

“Alright. So, you rated your “hot bath” experience last week as a 2, and you kind of wrote it off as “just okay.” Your depression feeds off this, convincing you that nothing really makes you feel good. Why? Because it uses a black and white lens. But if you say, “I got as much enjoyment out of taking a hot bath as I could expect from taking a hot bath at home, you should give it a 5. If you only got a 2, that would mean there was something about the experience that made it less enjoyable than it could have been, like your water wasn’t very hot or you sat there ruminating about how you can’t afford to go to a fancy spa like you use to. In this way, we are comparing apples to apples, not apples, to a five-course meal at the best restaurant in town.”

In the same way, we ask you to do this for your “accomplishment” rating. Let’s say, for example, you want to clean out your garage. You realize that it will take 5-6 hours of work, so you break it into several smaller tasks, each taking 10-15 minutes. You begin by scheduling two tasks for Saturday morning: picking up and throwing away all the trash on the floor of the garage and taking the bags to the dump. Saturday morning comes and you do your two assigned tasks. After the assignment, you give yourself a “1” on the accomplishment rating. Ask yourself, “Is this being fair to myself?” If you think, “Yeah, that’s fair. Why should I give myself a higher rating when I only did two little things? I still have hours and hours of work left.” Yes, that is true, but your goal was to just accomplish two tasks. Did you do those? Yes. Did you leave any trash on the floor? No. Did you throw away the bags at the dump the way they should have been disposed of? Yes. So why give yourself a “1?”

Be Objective:

As we’ve been saying, depression plays dirty tricks on you. It becomes an internal critic that feeds off black-and-white, all-or-nothing thinking. Like in the example above, if you were to give yourself a “1,” it would be like going to the gym and working out hard. Then you get on the scale and say, “See, I’m still 30 pounds overweight. This was a total waste of time.”

Another dirty trick of depression is using a mental filter, taking one negative experience to discolor all your positives. I once had a patient (we will give her a pseudonym, Sally) who wanted to clean her kitchen. We broke this into smaller steps, and she decided she was going to plan one step: unloading her dishwasher. She planned to start at 9:00 am the next morning. She came back the next week and said, “It didn’t work, doctor Sibcy. It was a total disaster. I felt ten times worse after it was all said and done.”

I was shocked. How could this have backfired so badly? I asked her to walk me through what happened.

She got up, went to the kitchen, opened the dishwasher door, and began putting away one dish at a time. After she finished, she felt pretty good, so she decided to clean out the sink and reload the dishwasher. She still felt pretty good, so she ended up cleaning off the counters, cleaning the stovetop, cleaning out her refrigerator, sweeping the floor, and then mopping it.

“Okay,” I said. “So did you feel good after you finished?”

“Yeah, I felt great!” she said. “But later, my husband came home from work and said, ‘I see you finally decided to get off your butt and do something around her.’ I was furious. I didn’t say anything, I just went back to bedroom and crawled back into my hole. I felt like, ‘What’s the point? No one appreciates me or what I do. So he can kiss my big fat lazy tail. I won’t do a thing around that house ever again.’”

In this case, we realized that the real problem was more about dealing with her husband and their broken relationship than her lack of motivation. But dealing with relationship problems is a topic for another podcast

series down the road. I did help her see that, objectively speaking, the assignment really boosted her energy level, and she felt good. It was her husband's sarcastic comment that depression seized upon and used the mental filter to write off or discolor all that she had accomplished.

Develop Compassion Toward Yourself:

The most famous dirty trick of depression is self-criticism. It's easy to believe that the best way to get yourself out of depression is by being really hard on yourself. But don't fall for this dirty trick. It may have worked for you at other times in your life; you learned to kick yourself in the behind to motivate yourself. But this strategy has diminishing returns. Over time, it demoralizes you and zaps your self-esteem. It spoils everything, just like Sally's husband's sarcastic comment made her want to give up and crawl into a hole. Self-compassion isn't about being over-indulgent or lackadaisical toward yourself. It's about being fair and honest. It's about being encouraging. It's about treating yourself in the same way as a good friend would treat a good friend. Cultivating self-compassion is about you treating yourself with warmth and tenderness. You can be honest with yourself and be encouraging at the same time. If your friend told you they took a nice, hot bath at home the other day, you wouldn't say, "So what? That's nothing like going to a great spa at the Grove Park Inn in Ashville, North Carolina." Or if your friend said she planned just to clean out her dishwasher and then ended up cleaning the whole kitchen, you wouldn't say, "Yeah, but your husband made that sarcastic comment, so all your effort was for nothing. You really shouldn't give yourself any credit for that. You should punish him and yourself by never doing anything around the house again." As a good friend, you'd be realistically encouraging. "Yeah, it feels good to get a nice hot bath," or "That's great you ended up doing a lot more cleaning than you set out to do. It's a shame your husband was being a jerk. But you should give yourself some credit for what you did."

Your depression has convinced you to take such an antagonistic stance toward yourself. Now is your opportunity to work on setting aside your critic and cultivating your self-compassion. It won't be easy. It will take some practice and some discipline. By practicing self-compassion alongside this behavior activation plan, you can start to reverse the depressive loop.