



Healthy Minds Lincolnshire

Low Mood

A support pack for parents/ carers

What is low mood?

We all feel fed up, miserable or sad at times. These feelings don't usually last longer than a week or two, and don't interfere too much with our lives. People can often say they're depressed if they are having a bad day or feel sad about something, but depression is much more than that.

With low mood, the feelings don't lift after a few days, and they can carry on for weeks or months. Low mood can impact on daily life and leave someone feeling unmotivated or not enjoying things that they used to. It can cause conflict in relationships and also lead to isolation and feeling lonely. People experiencing low mood might have feelings or thoughts that they are worthless, empty, and even that life is not worth living. It can also impact on energy levels, concentration, appetite and sleep.



How does low mood affect your child?

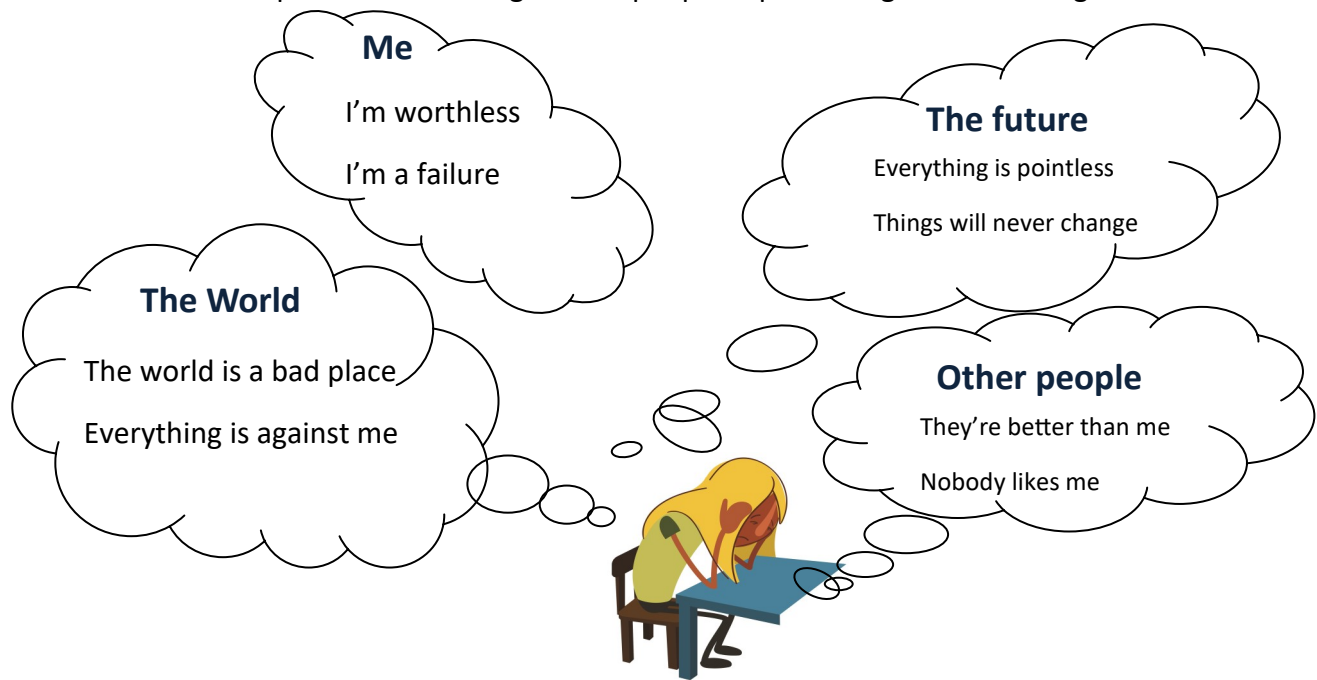
Low mood or depression may be something new to you, or something that is familiar. Maybe it's something a friend, co-worker, family member or even you have experienced at some time. It is however important to acknowledge that people can experience low mood in different ways and doesn't just impact on one particular thing either. It can cause us to think differently, behave differently, and feel differently in our emotions and also our bodies.

It can be hard for parents or other adults to know when a child or teenager is experiencing low mood. In addition to 'normal' childhood challenges such as being seemingly irritable, having low energy, a lack of interest in things and being less engaged with family life, some of the symptoms of low mood can look different in teenagers than they do in adults and so it is not always easy to recognise or realise that a young person may be experiencing a period of low mood.

Generally people describe the thinking style of someone with low mood as 'negative'. These thoughts can be about you, but also about other people, what you think other people might think about you, the world around you and also about the future. Having all these different thoughts, about lots of different things can be overwhelming and so it's no wonder people find it difficult to do other things.



Here are some examples of some thoughts that people experiencing low mood might have:



Does any of this sound familiar? You may notice your child being very critical and self-critical, focusing on difficulties, faults or problems, or complaining a lot. Let's take a closer look at what depression/low mood is like for your child and tick the ones that are relevant:

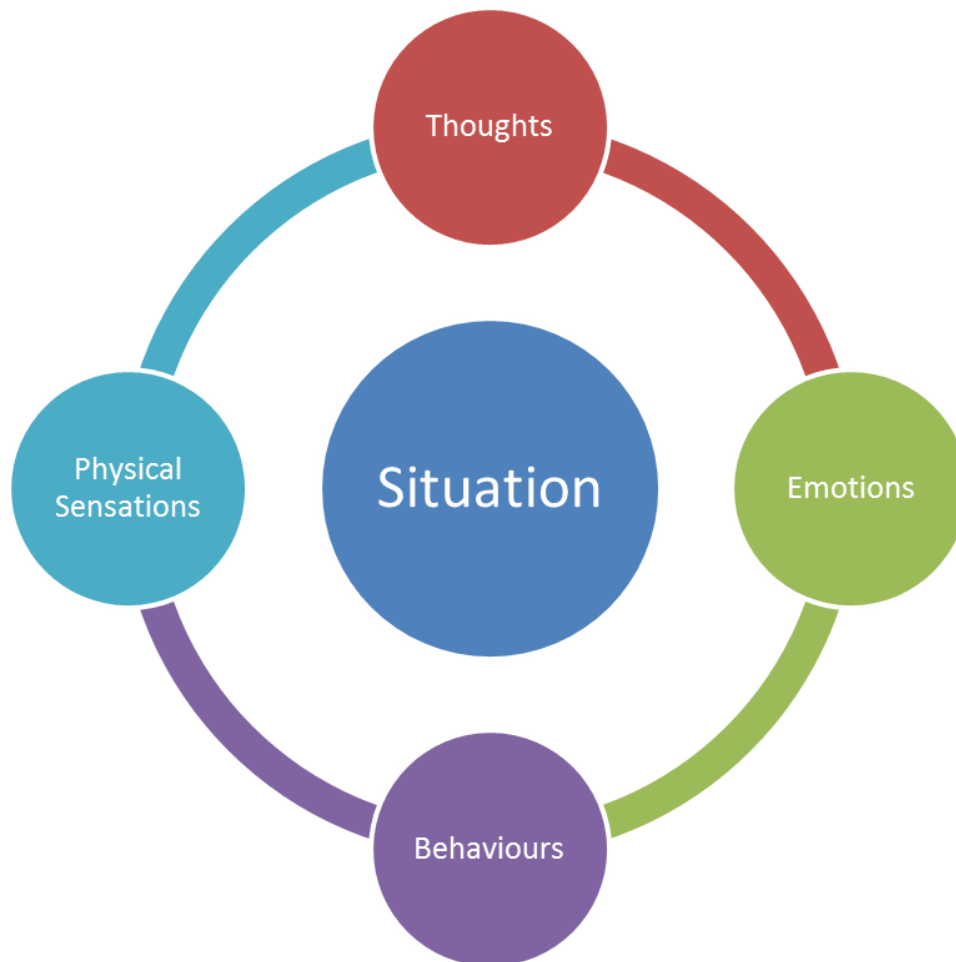
- | | |
|--|--|
| Feeling sad or empty <input type="checkbox"/> | Sensitive to criticism, rejection or failure, or perceiving things in this way <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Feeling hopeless or as though everything is going wrong <input type="checkbox"/> | Crying a lot, or more easily <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Feeling guilty about things <input type="checkbox"/> | Stay in bed a lot <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Feeling worthless, unimportant or not good enough <input type="checkbox"/> | Have difficulty getting to sleep <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Feeling irritable or annoyed, easily irritated or hostile <input type="checkbox"/> | Waking up in the night or early in the morning and not being able to go back to sleep <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Spending more time on their own <input type="checkbox"/> | Feeling tired or exhausted <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Not wanting to talk to, or see anyone <input type="checkbox"/> | Finding it hard to remember things <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Not enjoying things that they used to <input type="checkbox"/> | Not feeling hungry, or feeling more hungry <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Finding it hard to concentrate <input type="checkbox"/> | Experiencing unexplained aches and pains such as headaches or stomach ache <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Finding it difficult to do school work <input type="checkbox"/> | |

Your child may find it really difficult to talk about how they are feeling, and that's OK. Sometimes some of the thoughts we have when we are feeling low can make us feel unimportant or that no-one cares about us. We might also feel ashamed or guilty, or simply just not be able to put how we are feeling into words. Try not to take it personally, as parents we can also be very critical of ourselves even when we are trying our best.

What keeps the low mood going?

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Healthy Minds Lincolnshire recommends using the 5 areas cognitive behavioural model to understand and explain to the young person why they are feeling low in mood and what they need to do to break the cycle. It is useful for the young person to keep a diary to jot down negative thoughts and how this makes them feel.



(Padesky, 1986)

Situation – What might trigger the feelings of low mood? Explore situations that the young person has experienced or is avoiding.

Thoughts – Can the young person recognise the thoughts that they are having in relation to that situation? E.g. I am useless, nobody likes me.

Emotions – What emotions are they experiencing? Are they feeling sad, lonely, angry, disappointed?

Physical Reactions – What physical sensations are they experiencing? Do they feel tired, generally unwell, suffer from frequent headaches or often feel sick? Or do they describe sensations such as a heavy feeling in their body, a pressure in their head, a sinking feeling in their tummy?

Behaviour – What is the resulting behaviour? Are they avoiding situations? Have they stopped doing activities they used to enjoy? Are they showing more irritability through a short temper, arguing more with others etc?

So, how can you help?

Talk to your young person

Tell them that you have noticed they seem to be feeling sad or low in mood recently. Ask them if they would like to talk about it and ask them how you can help. They may already know what will help but haven't felt able to ask.



Listening and validation

When talking to your young person try not to jump in and solve everything for them immediately. Just listen at first and validate how they are feeling. Validation is the recognition and acceptance of another person's thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behaviours as understandable. Try to understand what is going on for your young person in a non-judgemental way. Show that you understand by reflecting back what they are saying or guessing at how they may be feeling. E.g. you must have felt very sad and disappointed when your friend didn't speak to you at lunchtime. I think I would feel that way too.

A great example of validation can be found in a video clip of the film Inside Out, which you can watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QT6FdhKriB8> If you have not received this document electronically, simply type 'inside out validation clip' into Google and the YouTube video will appear in the search results.

Help your young person to understand what is going on for them

Use the 5 area model above to explore thoughts, feelings, behaviours and physical sensations. Help your young person to pick any thoughts and behaviours that are unhelpful and help them come up with some different, more positive thoughts or look at changing some behaviours that might be keeping the problem going.



Diet, Sleep and Exercise

It is important to remember that physical health and mental health is closely linked. For example -If we don't eat a balanced diet we may end up with vitamin deficiencies that can leave you feeling lethargic and depressed, if we don't sleep sufficiently we feel tired and emotional and this can lead to problems both physically and mentally.

Diet - modern diets are often high in sugars, fats and salt and low in fibre, essential fatty acids and vitamins and minerals.

- * Children should eat a balanced diet of three meals a day including breakfast.
- * Try and avoid artificial additives, reduce pre-prepared meals and takeaways.
- * If you find it difficult to get your child to eat a balanced diet consider a multi-vitamin and mineral supplement and essential fatty acids (Omega 3)

See the NHS Eat Well guide for more information: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/the-eatwell-guide/>



Sleep - children and young people need significantly more sleep than adults to support their rapid mental and physical development. Sleep routine is important for us all to feel refreshed and motivated. Encourage your child to go to bed at the same time each night and to get up at the same time each morning. To get a good night's sleep it needs to be dark – ban electrical equipment from being used in the bedroom. As well as being over stimulated, light from this equipment prevents melatonin production which the body makes to control our natural sleep/wake cycles.

Children age 6-13 need 9-11 hours of sleep a day, Teenagers should have between 8 and 10 hours sleep. See: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/healthy-sleep-tips-for-children/> for more advice.

Exercise - We all know that exercise and physical activity is beneficial for our physical health. It helps us maintain a healthy weight, strengthens our bones, muscles and internal organs and reduces the risk of some disease. Exercise also increases our ability to deal with stress, gives us more energy and improves our sleep. When you are active your brain releases endorphins which can calm anxiety and lift your mood. See: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/physical-activity-guidelines-children-and-young-people/> for more advice.

Support your young person to use specific strategies – the Healthy Minds practitioner you have had contact with may have sent you/your young person some more specific strategies that can help to improve low mood. Help your young person to practice these strategies regularly. And remember, it is ok to have set backs and forget to use strategies at times. Be kind to yourself and your young person and keep going!

See: <https://www.lpft.nhs.uk/young-people/lincolnshire/young-people/helping-you-help-yourself> for lots more useful information.