SIMPLE STEPS TO IMPROVE YOUR MOOD

Simple Steps To Improve Your Mood

By Dr. Sarah Allen

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Simple Steps To Improve Your Mood

Hi There,

Thank you for downloading my free booklet. If you have got this far you are probably struggling with your emotions in some way and want to change how you are feeling. I am here to help.

When you feel overwhelmed and stressed, life's challenges, big or small, are a lot harder to manage. Finding balance in our lives is never easy and sometimes I think it is just another thing we feel we should put on our "to do" list, but we never quite get around to it: Pick up dry cleaning, buy a birthday present, find balance ….. Let's think instead that achieving emotional balance is a very important work in progress. You won't be able to do all these things I suggest in the report at once, but adding one or two things small changes a day to your routine can really help to improve your mood and make life more enjoyable. When you come to think about it, this is what life ought to be.

Let's Identify the Problem

When clients first come in to see me, the main concerns that come up again and again are:

1. How can I feel less stressed, angry and/or down and unmotivated?
2. How can I improve my relationships?
3. How can I stop worrying about everything: my children, partner, friends, work, my "to do" list….

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I have found that when put in to practice regularly, three very important things help you move in the right direction when you are trying to improve your mood, achieve better relationships and feel less overwhelmed and worried.

1. Steps To Reduce Stress

In small doses, stress can actually be useful as it helps you to stay focused, alert and increases energy. But when stress becomes chronic, it can damage your health, your mood, your relationships, and your overall quality of life. Stress is sneaky! It can easily creep up on you so that being frazzled and overwhelmed starts to feel normal. You may not even recognize how much it is affecting you so it is really important to recognize the signs and symptoms of stress and then take steps to stop feeling so overwhelmed. When we get stressed, adrenaline floods our body and makes our thoughts race. The first step is a short deep breathing exercise as slowing down your breath stops the adrenaline so you can think straight.

You don't need to be in a yoga class to do this breathing technique. It can be done anywhere, it only takes one minute!

Practice at home when you are not feeling stressed and then it is easier to do it in a time of stress.

One Minute Stress Reliever

Place your hand just beneath your belly button so you can feel the gentle rise and fall of your stomach as you breathe.

Breathe in slowly. Pause for a count of three.

Breathe out slowly through your nose.

Pause for a count of three. Breathe in slowly again.

Pause for a count of three. Breathe out slowly through your nose again.

Continue to breathe like this for one minute, pausing for a count of three after each inhalation and exhalation.

Alternatively, while sitting comfortably, take a few slow deep breaths and quietly repeat to yourself "I am" as you breathe in and "relaxed" as you breathe out.

Do this slowly, two or three times. Then feel your entire body relax into the support of the chair.

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Effects of Stress	
Brain Effects	**Mood Effects**
• Memory problems • Inability to concentrate • Poor judgment • Seeing the negative rather than positive • Constant worrying • Anxious or racing thoughts	• Moodiness • Irritability or short fuse • Agitation, inability to relax • Feeling overwhelmed • Depression or general unhappiness • Sense of loneliness and isolation
Physical Effects	**Behavioral Effects**
• Aches and pains • Frequent illnesses • Diarrhea or constipation • Nausea, dizziness • Chest pain, racing heartbeat • Loss of sex drive	• Changes in eating habit (more or less) • Changes in sleep habits (too much or too little) • Isolating yourself from others • Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities • Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing) • Using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs to relax

You may feel like the stress in your life is out of your control, and it's true, sometimes you can't control situations or the way other people act. But there is always a way to control how you respond. This is easier said than done when everything is coming at you at once, but the first step in managing stress better is to identify the cause or more likely, causes of your stress. Next you can take charge: take charge of your thoughts, your emotions, your schedule, your environment, and the way you deal with your problems.

Doing nothing will only make problems worse.

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Stress management involves changing the situation when you can, changing your reaction to it when you can't, and most importantly, taking care of yourself and your needs. When we are calm and relaxed, we can cope with everything better so here are some quick stress-busters:

When you've got five minutes

While sitting down, take a break from whatever you're doing and check your body for tension.

Some people feel it in their shoulders, others in their chest or stomach.

Relax your facial muscles and allow your jaw to fall open slightly.

Let your shoulders drop. Let your arms fall to your sides.

Allow your hands to loosen so that there are spaces between your fingers.

Now uncross your legs or ankles.

Feel your thighs sink into your chair, letting your legs fall comfortably apart.

Feel your shins and calves become heavier and your feet grow roots into the floor.

Now breathe in slowly and breathe out slowly.

When People Are Making You Angry

When you are stressed adrenaline runs through your body and one effect of that is that your thoughts race. Racing thoughts make thinking clearly difficult and that is when you are more likely to lash out and say things you don't mean. Doing a quick breathing exercise clears your thoughts and lets you take a time out so you can come back to the situation and deal with it

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calmly. This usually means you will get a better response from the other person and a better outcome overall.

Prevent losing your cool by breathing and squeezing the tips your thumb and middle finger together. Now breathe out slowly and relax your tense hands.

I don't mean that you should always push down your anger and ignore what is bothering you. Driving your feelings underground only forces them to pop up again, bigger and uglier, at inappropriate times and places and usually towards someone that doesn't deserve it. Better to use the above technique to calm down and then tackle the issue with good communication skills which brings me to me next tip.

When You Are Upset By Arguments With Other People

Disagreements can be dealt with more quickly by using good communication skills such as stating your needs or distress directly (not expecting the other person to mind-read) and avoiding "you always" or "you never" (these statements always make the other person defensive and more likely to continue arguing).

Use "I" language instead, i.e. "I feel _____ when you _____. "; "I would really appreciate it if you could _____. "; "I need some help in _____". It also helps to stick to the present disagreement and not bring in past hurts. These communication tips aren't just for our partner. They work well with our children, friends and acquaintances too.

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As you can see, reducing stress in your life is really important in improving your overall mood. Stress is also the number one cause of insomnia which brings me to my next step to improve your mood.

2. Steps To Getting More Sleep

Getting more sleep sounds easy in theory, but so many people find it hard to achieve. The average amount of sleep needed by adults for their body and mind to be fully rested is around seven to eight hours a night. This of course can vary but you know you aren't getting enough when your mood is negatively affected. Lack of sleep can stop you thinking clearly, wrecks productivity and can alter your mood significantly. According to the National Sleep Foundation (NSF) the "walking tired" anger more easily, have problematic relationships and are less likely than those who sleep well to exercise, eat healthfully, have sex and engage in fun leisure activities; all because they are too tired.

I hear you - what with work, errands and seeing to your family's needs, you have so much to do that you can only get them done by staying up late. Maybe going to bed in the wee hours is the only way to get some "me time". Staying up late is probably not working for you though and improving your sleep is one of the best ways to improve the quality of your life. We need to work on being either more organized or less perfectionist about getting things done, knowing it's okay to ask and expect help, and knowing it is totally necessary to have "me time". But not at the expense of sleep!

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In the meantime, we need to work on setting up a good night-time routine. Our every day "to do list" is much less daunting when we are refreshed!

The National Sleep Foundation states "It's not uncommon for people who don't get enough sleep to be depressed or for people who are depressed to not sleep well enough." This is very 'chicken and the egg'. Who knows which comes first, but what we do know is that over time, impaired memory, mood and other functions become a chronic way of life. In the long term, this can affect your job or relationships.

So how can we improve sleep? Firstly, keep regular sleeping hours. **A bedtime ritual** teaches the brain to become familiar with sleep times and wake times and programs the brain and internal body clock to get used to a set routine. Most adults need between six and nine hours of sleep every night. By working out what time you need to wake up, you can work backwards and set a regular bedtime schedule.

Secondly, you can't expect to "go, go, go", then be able to fall straight to sleep. **Winding down** is a critical stage in preparing for bed.

Here Are Some Ways To Relax

- Have a warm bath (not hot) as this will help your body reach a temperature that's ideal for rest.
- Writing "to do" lists for the next day can organize your thoughts and clear your mind of any worrying thoughts that pop in to your head (more about that later…)
- Relaxation exercises, such as light yoga stretches, help to relax the muscles. Don't exercise vigorously though, as it will have the opposite effect.
- Relaxation CDs can help as they use a hypnotic voice to guide you through muscle relaxation and soothing music and sound effects to relax your brain.
- Watching TV or any computer or phone screen keeps the brain engaged and active so it is harder to fall asleep. It is better to read a book or listen to the radio as that relaxes the mind by distracting it from the present worries.

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Perhaps the most important thing to remember in getting enough sleep is that **your needs are important** and putting your need for sleep above the demands of others is the kindest thing you can do for yourself and those who are important to you. Insomnia can often be caused by lying awake worrying which brings me to the third step I think it is important to work on in order to improve your mood.

3. Steps To Decrease Worrying

So why do we worry about things? Worries bother us. We can't sleep or concentrate because we have pessimistic thoughts going round and around in our head, but in a way, worries make sense as they pull us in to a false sense of feeling in control. We're doing something, even if it is just worrying. You continue doing it because you might think:

- Maybe I'll find a solution.
- I don't want to overlook anything.
- If I keep thinking a little longer, maybe I'll figure it out.
- I don't want to be surprised. If I consider all the possible outcomes I'll be more in control when something bad happens.

We can have a hard time giving up on our worries because, in a sense, our worries have been working for us.

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So now I've pointed that out, let's just stop worrying then! Unfortunately, telling yourself to stop worrying doesn't work for long. You can distract yourself or suppress the thoughts but they keep popping back up. Instead I would like you to distinguish between whether your worry is solvable or not. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Is the problem something you're currently facing? Is it an imaginary what-if or maybe it is something that is in the past and has already happened?
- If the problem is an imaginary what-if, how likely is it to happen? Is your concern realistic?
- If it is something you are currently facing, can you do something about the problem or prepare for it, or is it out of your control?

Learning To Accept Difficult Feelings When Worry Is Not Solvable

If the problem is in the past then you have to decide whether to say something to the person involved or do nothing and accept what happened. If the worry isn't something you can solve, you have to do nothing and practice acceptance. That doesn't mean it doesn't feel bad though. In such cases, it's important to tune into your emotions. Your brain is so busy going over and over pretend conversations with the person that caused the hurt that it gives a temporary

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sense of control that something is being done. But it's not really allowing you to get over it and it doesn't allow you time to feel.

The only way out of this is by embracing your feelings. Sometimes we just can't control events and we have to embrace uncertainty. Sometimes we are hurt and angry but there is nothing that can be done, but feel our emotions. You are in control. You are deciding to feel your feelings so you can eventually let it go.

What to Do When the Worry Is Solvable

If the worry is solvable, start brainstorming ideas about all the possible solutions you can think of (try not to get hung up on finding a perfect solution though) and then make a plan that focuses on things you have the power to change. Once you have a plan of action and start doing something about the problem, you'll feel much less worried. This technique is also very useful when you are stuck in an argument with someone. First identify what is the problem you are arguing about.

Brainstorm together all the things you both can possible do about the problem and the likely outcomes and then make a joint plan of action.

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Stop Worry by Questioning the Worried Thought

We all worry sometimes, but if you constantly worry, chances are you look at the world in ways that make it seem more negative than it really is. For example, you may overestimate the possibility that things will turn out badly, jump immediately to worst-case scenarios or treat every negative thought as if it were fact. These irrational, pessimistic attitudes are known as cognitive distortions. The first step is noticing that you feel a negative emotion, worry, anger, sadness, etc. Next, ask yourself what your thought is.

Here's an example: Kate was feeling overwhelmed at work. Her inbox was piling up and she had back to back meetings all day. She felt worried that she was so behind that her boss would be annoyed with her. She noticed her shoulders and neck felt tensed up and she identified her feeling as anxiety. When actively trying to identify her thoughts she realized she was thinking "I won't ever be able to catch up" and "My boss will think I am bad at my job".

Ask yourself the following questions to stop the worry:

- What's the evidence that the thought is true? That it's not true?
- Is there a more positive, realistic way of looking at the situation?
- What's the probability that what I'm scared of will actually happen?
- If the probability is low, what are some more likely outcomes?
- Is the thought helpful? How will worrying about it help me and how will it hurt me?
- What would I say to a friend who had this worry?

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When Kate asked herself those questions she realized that the probability that she would “never catch up” was low and that looking back over the past year she could see that there were periods when workload was high and periods when workload was lower. Also, she did not have any evidence to support that her boss would think she was bad at her job. She had had a very positive review 2 weeks before and a prior time she had felt overwhelmed, he had helped her prioritize deadlines. She saw that the way she was thinking about things wasn’t helpful. It was more helpful to reassure herself that she would get things done eventually and to sit down and prioritize tasks. She also felt more in control when she looked at next week’s calendar. She could see that there were blocks of time that were meeting-free, so she would be able to catch up then.

I have just shown you how challenging worries and negative thoughts is a very useful tool for reducing the way that they make us feel bad about ourselves. This is part of the type of therapy I practice and it is called Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT). It is a short-term "here and now" therapy that is a proven effective treatment for a wide range of problems including depression, anxiety, stress, eating /weight issues and relationship problems.

By learning to identify how your thoughts influence your mood and behavior, you then learn how to turn the negative thoughts around and feel better. I don’t just mean let’s turn all your negative thoughts into positive sunny ones. That wouldn’t be realistic. Let’s do a reality check instead. Ask yourself if your worries are in the present (and not the past or future) and whether the situation is in your control or not. Then by looking at all the evidence you can challenge those unhelpful thoughts and develop a more balanced perspective.

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Thank you for taking the time to read my report. I hope it has been helpful and will go on to be a source of useful tips and tools you can use in everyday life. Remember though that you can't change everything at once. It is best to try to change one or two things at a time and work on those so they become useful new habits. Then go on to incorporate more changes, one at a time.

About The Author

Dr. Sarah Allen is originally from the UK but has been living and bringing up her family in Northbrook, IL for the past 16 years.

She received her doctorate in Clinical Psychology at Southampton University, England, where she trained in a psychotherapy treatment called cognitive behavior therapy (CBT). CBT is short-term "here and now" therapy that is a proven effective treatment for a wide range of problems including depression, anxiety, stress, eating /weight issues and relationship problems.

Her skills and 20 years of experience allow her to get to the root of problems quickly and show you practical ways to feel more in control of your life.

There are many ways we hold ourselves back from happiness. Sarah empowers her clients with the tools necessary to deal with the stress that life and relationships bring, both in the present and for when they show up again in the future.

For more information about Dr. Allen's services please visit her website at www.drsarahallen.com or contact her to discuss whether you could benefit from working with her on 847 791-7722 or email drsfcallen@gmail.com.

You can also sign up for her blog on www.drsarahallen.com to read more tips on how to improve your mood.

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