

Mood swings Stabilisation Pack



**Cwm Taf University Health Board –
Psychological Therapies Department**

Mood swings

What is mood?

We are always in one type of mood or another, every moment of the day, even if we are not aware of it all the time. We often describe moods as simply 'good' or 'bad', although all of us have a whole range of moods in between.

Lots of things influence our mood and it changes throughout the day. Mood changes can become distressing when they are extreme or intense and when they change suddenly for no apparent reason. This can sometimes feel out of control, frightening and unsafe. Sometimes people have such extreme moods that they may need hospital admission and support from health staff.

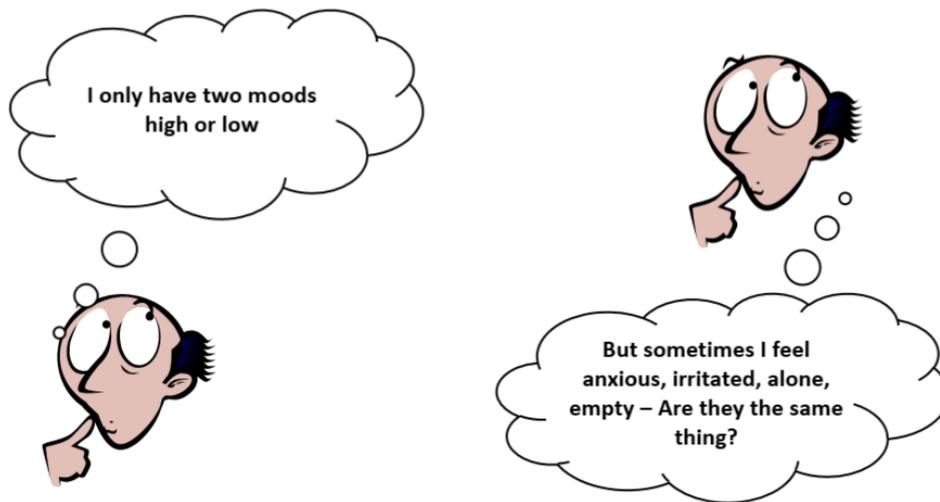
Some people develop unusual beliefs when they are 'high', perhaps that they are a great leader or are about to make an important scientific discovery. Some people swing between different extremes, such as feeling sad to feeling very angry. Some people have changes in mood for days or weeks at a time whereas for others there may be changes within the same day or a few hours. Some people talk about 'mixed states' in which they feel sad and happy at the same time.

There is no clear cut-off between the ups and downs that all of us experience, and states of mind that may be diagnosed as 'bipolar disorder.' In fact, some people enjoy the energy and creativity of their 'high' moods and feel that the lows are a price worth paying for them. A recent report by the British Psychological Society recommended that people should be able to decide for themselves whether they prefer to see their mood swings as an illness, or just as part of who they are (see resource list.) Whichever way you choose to look at it, it may be useful to think more about how you can manage your moods and what may be causing them to change so rapidly.

Changes in moods are often more intense and dramatic when people have faced difficult experiences in their life. If early relationships were insecure, we may not have had the opportunity to learn how to manage or regulate emotions, and keeping feelings in balance may be very difficult. In addition, trauma is common in the lives of people who have mood swings. If this is true for you, you may wish to talk to a GP or mental health worker about doing trauma processing work at some point.

How many different mood states do we have?

The man below might think he only has two main moods, but with some questioning he might start to think about other mood states that are not so obvious.



The fact is that we have many different mood states - it is just that some feel more extreme than others. We then forget to notice the ones where we 'don't feel much'. Care plans may focus on the more extreme states so we don't get the chance to explore the ones in between.

Accepting different moods

Some of our moods may be less acceptable to us than others and may link to events in our lives, such as trauma experiences. When we are younger we learn a lot about what types of mood and feeling are OK to express. For example, if a child grows up in a family where sad feelings are ignored or punished, they may find it very hard to allow themselves to have these feelings as an adult.

Controlling mood and internal experiences

We are always trying to control our mood to some extent. Often we are trying to match it up with the goal or task we are working towards. For example, if we want to get a good night's sleep, we may try to calm ourselves by having a hot drink, putting on comfy nightclothes, and reading in bed. These responses depend on the meaning the mood has to us. An extreme mood may lead us to respond in extreme ways.

Exercise: noticing moods

This exercise helps you to think about your internal experience and the ways in which you try to control it.

Think of your body temperature right now - how warm or cold you are. Is it too high or too low or just right? Now think about what you can do to alter that temperature. We do it all the time without thinking. If we are too hot we may open a window or take off a jumper. If too cold we might turn up the heating. These actions are all designed to control your internal experience of body temperature.

This principle also applies to controlling our moods.

What makes up a mood?

Moods are made up of physical experiences, emotions, thoughts and behaviours. It is useful to find out as much as possible about the moods you have, especially the ones that may cause you problems. This is the first step to helping with managing your moods. Pay as much attention to the less obvious mood states – ‘empty’, ‘numb’ and ‘normal’- when nothing much seems to be happening, as to the more extreme and intense states – ‘hyper’, ‘manic’ or ‘down in the dumps’. Notice the words you use. These might be common ones like ‘happy’, ‘sad’ or ‘anxious’. At other times they might be less common, ‘going haywire’, ‘dark’ or ‘frozen’.

Here is an exercise to see if we can get a good description of the mood state you are in right now. An example is given below:

Exercise: Naming and Describing Mood.
What name could you give to the mood you are in right now? Sadness
If you can't think of a name, can you give it a colour? Blue
What clues is your body giving you that you are in this type of mood? (Any pain, stiffness, emptiness, sweating, shaking, etc) Feeling tired, lethargic, lacking in energy
What types of thoughts go with this mood? (fast, slow, bad/good memories, self critical/blaming, etc) Lack of motivation, guilt, feeling useless and helpless

What do you tend to do when you are in this mood? (stay in, eat more, do something creative, etc)

Stay in bed all day, eat a lot less, avoid answering the telephone

Are some moods better than others?

All moods have helpful and unhelpful aspects. Often the more extreme mood states lead to more extreme responses, and people may say things like ‘I can’t cope with being sad even for a short while’.

It is impossible for us not to feel sad from time to time, so this reaction could be a problem. It might lead someone to use drugs or alcohol or other unhelpful ways of coping.

Mood swings

The views we have about our moods will affect how we react to them. For example, if we believe that an energetic mood makes us more popular and successful, we will try to feel that way more often. We may then start swinging between feeling ‘high’, excited, and on top of the world at one moment, to feeling sad, ashamed, and hopeless the next. In a high mood, people may behave in way that feels good at the time, but later they may regret overspending, going out more, using alcohol or having more sexual partners.

Sometimes changes in mood may be your mind’s creative way of solving a problem. If you usually feel bad or worthless, it may be comforting to believe that you are someone very important. If you have painful memories that you do not know how to deal with, a high mood may be a welcome escape. This doesn’t mean that you choose to feel ‘high’ – but it may serve a useful purpose at some level. However, this solution doesn’t last, and if underlying issues are not dealt with, you may fall back into despair and hopelessness again.

What triggers mood changes?

Changes in feelings often have a trigger and often we don’t know what that is or where the next one will come from. Possible external triggers are events such as leaving home, starting college, having children, ending relationships and so on. Our memories, thoughts or judgements may also be triggers,

particularly if we are reminded of events or situations that are distressing or difficult.

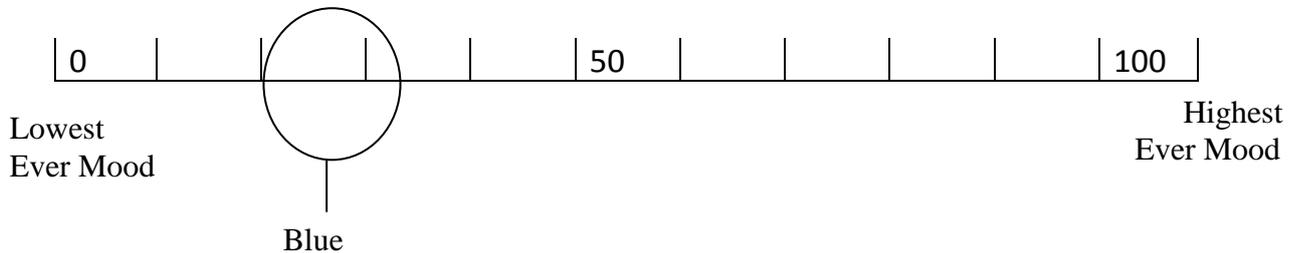
What you can do to help manage moods?

1. Looking after yourself and your basic needs

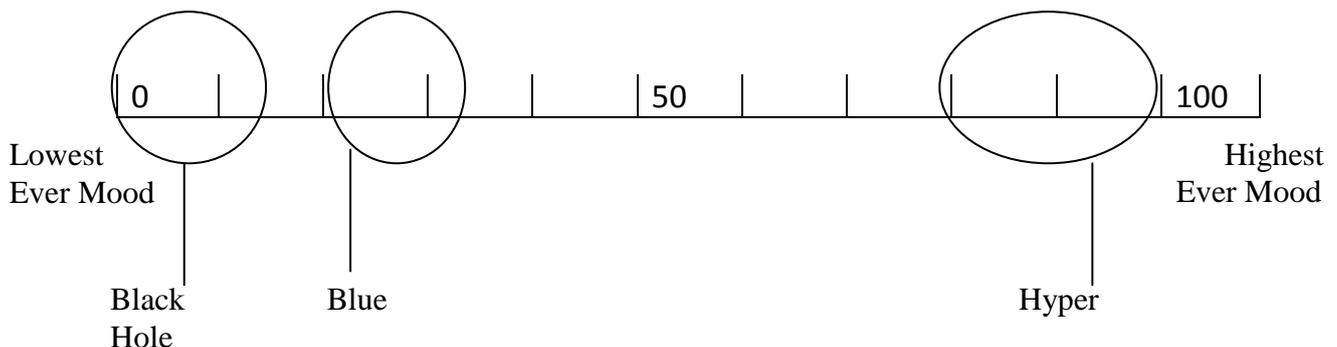
Making sure you are getting enough sleep is particularly important, as lack of sleep can trigger mood swings in some people. It is also important to eat well and generally look after yourself and keep to your routines. Drugs or alcohol ay be triggers for you.

2. Get a better understanding of your moods by plotting them on a scale

Understanding mood is an important starting point towards better management. If you can identify and describe your mood states and plot them out, you may be able to find some patterns. For example, above we have identified the mood 'blue' so now we can plot it in a continuum. A continuum is developed by taking the two most opposite and extreme mood states a person has experienced and putting them on a scale of 0-100. These extremes are often the 'lowest ever mood' and the 'highest ever mood'. Our job is to identify all those that go between.



For this person the mood, 'blue' falls into a range of between 20-30. We can find more mood states that fit on the continuum by going through the naming and describing mood exercise again with a different mood state - name a new one, describe it and plot it on the continuum. Keep doing this until you have identified some of the most prominent mood states you have. After a couple of goes it might start to look like the one below.



As this continuum gets filled with a number of different mood states, you will build a picture that can help you to quickly notice your mood and how you tend to respond. If you notice that the way you cope is proving problematic, try alternative coping skills such as the soothing, distraction and grounding techniques that can be found in this manual (see other sections.)

3. Working towards your goals and the things that are important to you in life.

Although you need to avoid certain triggers if you can, we also need goals to work towards. Problems can arise when a triggers and goals are very similar (i.e. we may have a goal to socialise more, but that might mean being near to alcohol which as proved to be a trigger in the past). To help, try to identify what is really important to you:

- Develop some clear achievable goals
- Work out what you value in life – work, parenthood, interests etc
- Look at the things you wanted or hoped for before mood swings became a problem for you. How can you take this up again?

4. Work towards a 'healthy' state or how you want to be.

As well as focusing on the less wanted mood states try to build in a 'healthy state'. This is one that you might only catch glimpse of now and again. It is how you would rather feel most of the time.

For example: 'I want to be able to feel tired and lacking in energy and without fearing that I am going to have a breakdown'.

Reading and Resources

The WRAP plan <http://www.workingtogetherforrecovery.co.uk>

British Psychological Society 'Understanding Bipolar' document can be accessed for free at <http://ubd.spectrumdevelopment.org.uk/understandingbipolar.pdf>