

A Decided Difference Emergency Mood Repair Kit

10 quick tools for beating depression and anxiety

Events that we call “negative” or “bad” happen in all of our lives. Sometimes your equilibrium is shaken by these life events. Maybe a friend or family member is diagnosed with a terminal illness, has a heart attack, or dies in an accident. Maybe a natural disaster destroys your home and your sense of safety. Maybe something you see on the news scares you to your core. Maybe you become overwhelmed by the pressures of daily life and find yourself feeling hopeless.

This compact emergency kit is for use during those times when you feel you can't cope, when you feel paralyzed by anxiety or overwhelmed by feelings of depression. It is designed to lift you off the bottom and set you back on your feet with a renewed sense of hope.

Like any tool kit, using this one does require work. A hammer can't drive a nail without a human hand picking up the tool and swinging it. It is up to you to pick up these tools and use them. Fortunately, they can help you to feel better right away, even if they are not used perfectly.

1. Recognize that you have a choice about how to think and feel. Deliberately choosing your thoughts is not the same as denying your feelings. When something bad happens or we feel overwhelmed, sometimes we are instinctively angry, hurt, sad or afraid. Events happen in our lives. That is not within our control, but how we choose to respond is within our control. Our responses depend largely on how we think about what has happened, our internal response to the external world. You do not have to respond to external events in the same way your mother would, the way your best friend would, or the way the world says you “should.” Remember that our thoughts create our feelings. Do not take this to mean you are to blame for feeling depressed or anxious; it simply means you can turn those feelings away with the right tools. Dealing with life is a requirement. Feeling miserable while doing it is optional. You can smile and deal or cry and deal. Choose one or the other, but know that it is your choice.

2. Be present in the present moment. Be here, now. The thoughts provoking your bad mood are probably about something that is not happening in this present moment. We ruminate about things that happened this morning or last week or last year. We worry about what will happen tonight or tomorrow or next month.

Ask yourself what is bothering you. If the answer begins with “What if...” or “I should...” or “If only...” this strategy may be helpful. Focus on *this very moment*. Where are you? What are you doing? What is in your immediate environment? Are there things happening right now that are pleasant? Is there something in this very moment to enjoy if you will allow yourself? The past and the future exist only in our imaginations. There is only the present moment in which to live, and you get to decide what to do with this moment. It is yours. Take it and savor it.

3. Focus on gratitude. This is definitely my go-to strategy, my first choice, my all-time favorite. It is always possible to find something to be grateful for in any circumstance, even if you simply feel grateful that the bad situation isn't even worse. If you are able to look around you, give thanks that you are safe in this moment, physically comfortable, well-fed, whatever. Give thanks for your eyes, that you are able to see. Most of the time, you will come up with far more details to feel grateful about. It doesn't have to be anything complicated. Human brains cannot focus on gratitude and negativity at the same time. Allow your gratitude to force out the thoughts that are causing your bad feelings.

4. See yourself with compassion. If a good friend were in your current situation, how would you treat him or her? Would you berate your friend for being weak, lazy, helpless, or pathetic? If not, why would you treat yourself that way? If you were talking to a friend, what advice would you give? How about giving yourself a break and being gentle with yourself? Remind yourself, as you would remind a friend, that whatever it is, this too shall pass.

5. Listen to your mental soundtrack. All of us have thoughts that run through our minds without conscious effort. If you make it a point to really listen to those thoughts, you may find that they are an unending stream of negativity. Are the things you are saying to yourself inside your own head true? Or are they simply a loop of comments made by others, criticisms from the past, or your own thoughts about how you are falling short of your ideals? It is your head. You can choose to notice, challenge, and change the mental soundtrack playing in there. See tool #4 for suggestions about how to change it.

6. Look for errors in your thinking. Common mistakes that lead to depressed feelings involve blowing things out of proportion. You may be magnifying the negatives while minimizing the positives in your life. This can drag your feelings down fast. Are you making these errors in your thinking? Are you using words like "always," "never," "should" and "must" in your self-talk? Would your friends agree with the things you are saying to yourself? Would they talk to you that way? Writing the thoughts down can help you challenge them more easily.

Ask yourself also whether having these thoughts helps you in any way. Even if what you think is "true," is it helpful to dwell upon it? St. Paul's admonition to the Corinthians, to think on things that are lovely, is still good advice 2,000 years later.

Also keep in mind the tendency of depressed people to think in catastrophic and global terms. It probably isn't true that your whole life is ruined by one bad event, even if the bad event is truly terrible. You can probably think of people who have survived and thrived after worse. You can too, even if it seems impossible right now.

7. Ask yourself, "What do I want right now?" Yes, it is okay to ask, and it is okay to give yourself what you truly need. Depressed people can be especially bad at answering this question. They know what their husband or boyfriend or son or daughter

or mother or father or boss or employee or child's teacher's first cousin's neighbor wants, but they have a hard time answering for themselves. I am not even talking about things like, "I want world peace," or "I want my problems with my in-laws resolved." You know those things are not within your control anyway. Look for a small answer to relieve the stress you are feeling right now. There is nothing wrong with wanting a walk in the fresh air, a nap, a funny movie, or a good cry. Your heart knows what will make it feel better. Ask.

8. Check in with your body. How are you feeling physically? Are you are hungry? Are you overly tired or even exhausted? Are you suffering from a physical ailment such as a virus, or do you have a chronic illness that is not being well-managed? Your mood may be blue, or you may feel irritable, if your physical body is suffering or out of balance in some way. I have come to understand that if my body is not happy, it can wreak havoc with my mind. If my body is not well-fed and well-rested, it can make my mind and my heart miserable. If you aren't sure if your bad feelings originate with your body or your mind, try feeding yourself nourishing foods like fruit, vegetables, and high quality proteins. Try soaking your muscles in a hot bath. Take a nap or get a good night's rest and see how you feel afterwards. Even if you still have problems to deal with when you wake up, things may seem better in the morning simply because you are refreshed. Refilling your physical energy reserves often gives you more mental stamina as well.

9. Do something. Don't just sit there, do something. Get up off the couch. Wash your face. Do anything, as long as it absorbs your mind or allows your mind to rest while your hands are busy. Cook a complicated dish or pull weeds in the garden. Go to the park with a loaf of stale bread and feed the ducks. Go to a secondhand store and see if you can find something that reminds you of your high school years. Chase a butterfly. Clean a closet. Just make sure you do something active. Vegging out in front of the television or the computer often makes us feel worse.

Human brains are not meant to be left to their own devices. Given a task, anything at all to do, the brain will get busy for better or for worse. Give your brain something to think about besides the miserable thoughts that brought you to the mood of depression or anxiety.

10. Keep trying. If you try something and it works, keep doing it. Write down a reminder of what you did that worked. Write yourself a note, and put it where you can find it the next time you need it. Make copies of the note and put them in multiple locations where you will see them often. If you try something and it doesn't work, then try something else, and something else, and something else, until something *does* work. When you find what works for you, practice it often. All of these tools become easier to use and more effective with practice. Remember, thoughts cause feelings, and you really can choose your thoughts. Put your focus on lovely things and you will watch your world become a lovelier place.

You can find more ideas and suggestions on the blog at louannclark.com and in *A Decided Difference*, the podcast, available through iTunes and on Stitcher Radio on Demand.