

Outsmart

*Caught in the doldrums?
Experts share the quick tricks
that will have you feeling
happy in no time!*

When a bad mood strikes it's painful enough, but when you can't pinpoint exactly what you're feeling (anger? sadness? loneliness?), it can seem even worse: How can you pull yourself out of a state as vague as "the blahs" when waiting for the storm clouds to pass on their own only adds to the frustration?

"We tend to personalize crappy feelings and think there's something wrong with us when we don't have an external reason for why they've happened," observes Lisa Feldman Barrett, Ph.D., author of *How Emotions Are Made*. "But our moods are separate from our value as people." And the trigger isn't always psychological or social (like a worry or snub). It can be physical: Hunger, thirst, tiredness and other body sensations register not only as physical symptoms but also as "negative affect," or unpleasant emotions.

The key to feeling better no matter the cause? Barrett has discovered that a skill called "emotional granularity," or the ability to pinpoint your exact feelings (like "mad" versus "scandalized") helped people draw on almost 30 percent more coping strategies to beat a bad mood than those who couldn't name their emotions. "Each fine-grained distinction is associated with a different plan the brain has for managing a negative mood," she explains. Getting more specific leads to better problem-solving.

Your mood may feel vague, but experts assure it's easy to discover what's *really* weighing you down. Read on for easy tricks to help you find clarity and relief from painful emotions—today!

mystery moods

During a “fun” event

ASK: WHAT ELSE AM I FEELING?

You were excited to volunteer for the blood drive, but the day of the event, you’re inexplicably grouchy. You slap on a happy face, but that only makes things worse. “People often try to ignore or repress their feelings,” says Karen Kissel Wegela, Ph.D., author of *What Really Helps*. “But that doesn’t work because those feelings can pop up later in physical symptoms or dreams.”

A better way: Be alert to combinations of emotions you might be feeling, like frustration mixed with fear, advises Barrett. “Naming the feeling is one of the best things you can do since emotion words are associated with concepts—the brain’s tools for taking action.” And if there is no term for your feeling, Barrett encourages coining your own (like “lonedom” for boredom tinged with loneliness). “The bigger your vocabulary of emotion words, the more efficient your nervous system will be at containing and managing the bad mood.” Once you’ve pinned down a label, it’s easier to brainstorm targeted solutions.

It colors your world

ASK: WHO IS THIS REALLY ABOUT?

An afternoon slump strikes, and it has you viewing everyone with suspicion. (You just *know* Susan in Accounting has it out for you, along with that guy who cut you off in traffic.) “You don’t always identify a negative emotion as your own feeling. Sometimes you embed it in your perception of a person (like, *That guy is a jerk*),” explains Barrett. “When you’re feeling negative, it’s easier for the brain to go from

After a tough task

ASK: WHAT IS MY BODY SAYING?

Instead of smiling after finishing a hard to-do, you’re scowling. What gives? “Sometimes what’s wrong has nothing to do with your external circumstances but with your body,” says Barrett. “If your brain is running a deficit in its body budget, like you don’t have enough glucose because you haven’t eaten, your systems are unbalanced and you’ll feel the same unpleasant sensations as if someone said something hurtful to you.” Wegela agrees: “It took me years to figure out that I experience hunger as sadness.”

To get to a better place, Barrett suggests distinguishing physical discomfort from emotional distress. “Ask yourself, *Am I hungry? Thirsty? Do I need to rest for a few minutes?*” Identifying the physical factors influencing your mental state calls attention to the way a stuffy nose or aching back may be warping your perspective. After you’ve determined whether the culprit is a physical one, you can take action (eat, nap, cuddle with a pet), then navigate the world with a more positive outlook.

It comes out of nowhere

ASK: WHAT DOES THIS REMIND ME OF?

While out with friends for a ladies’ lunch, you can’t enjoy the fun because you suddenly feel annoyed. Before you know it, you’re snapping at your pals. “Common wisdom says when you have a bad feeling to express it, but that doesn’t always work,” observes Wegela. “When you don’t know why you’re in a bad mood, venting tends to perpetuate the mood without clarifying anything. You may end up saying things you might later regret and push your friends away.”

What can help: thinking of past experiences that feel similar to this one. “When analyzing a problem, your brain doesn’t say, *What is this?*” notes Barrett. “It says, *What is this like?* It’s predicting rather than reacting to cues in the environment.” You might realize that a friend’s offhand remark got your guard up because it reminded you of a critical neighbor’s passive barbs. Making that connection could help you see no harm was meant and there’s no reason to be upset now. Explains Barrett, “Your brain runs on patterns, so finding that pattern match will help you get over the bad mood faster.”

one bad thought to another, and soon the whole world is tinged with gray.”

When your mood starts coloring your entire outlook and you’re caught in a negative-thought spiral, claim ownership of the crummy feeling—experts say doing so will help you feel better faster. “Recognize that the emotion is yours, that *you’re* the one feeling it,” says Wegela. Once you remove other people from the equation, you’re

no longer a victim. You’re able to face the feeling head-on and come up with strategies for relief. You might realize, for example, that you’re not scheduling enough self-care into your day and a little pampering (massaging your temples, calling a loved one) makes all the difference. “If you own the emotion, you can do something with it,” says Wegela. “You have choices of how to respond and you’re no longer stuck.”