



IN 15 MINUTES YOU CAN...

...snap out of a funk

Clear the cobwebs and **pull yourself out of a bad mood, pronto.**

YOU'RE HAVING A TERRIBLE DAY, and the problem is more than your hair. Maybe your boss chewed you out, or you had a nasty fight with your sister, or your mother just went in for surgery. Whatever the reason, you're in a foul humor and you can't seem to get out of it. In an ideal world, you'd take off an hour, maybe even the day, to talk things over with a friend, lie in bed and mope, or call your therapist for a tune-up. But in the real world, where time is in short supply, you just want to feel better and get on with it. Psychologists say the first step in crawling out from under is identifying what brought you down in the first place; alas, that's not always easy. However, once you know what's bugging you, a few simple steps can help raise your spirits and let you cope with the problem at hand. Consider this three-step plan for lifting yourself out of the doldrums.

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“I'm not crazy...
I've just been
in a very bad mood
for 40 years!”

Shirley MacLaine as Ouiser
Boudreaux in *Steel Magnolias*



A BAD DAY

It all started when you overslept and were then late for a parent-teacher conference at your son's school. The slide continued with a harsh review from your boss at midday, a fight with your husband in the evening, and a burned chicken. No wonder the day ended in tears.

You'd like to blame your tears on the chicken or the spat with your husband. But when you think back, it was the meeting with the boss that sent you into a tailspin—leading you to argue with your husband and lose your focus and ruin dinner.

step 1: decode your mood

Sometimes you know exactly what's upsetting you. Or do you? Ask yourself these key questions to figure out what's wrong.

What's really bugging me?

You're irritable and sad, but you're not sure why. When you're feeling that way, "think about what happened earlier in the day or in the week," says Larina Kase, author of *Anxious 9 to 5: How to Beat Worry, Stop Second Guessing Yourself, and Work With Confidence* (New Harbinger, \$15). "Keep going back until you hit on the most upsetting thing, something that resonates with you." This will help you address the underlying problem rather than just focusing on the latest snafu in your life.

Am I avoiding something?

It's easier to pin your bad mood on stalled traffic than on, say, your stalled romantic life. If you still don't feel that you've arrived at the root problem, ask yourself if there's something big going on that you're unwilling to address. Is there someone—your new love, for instance, or your best friend—whom you're reluctant to show anger toward? Is there a nagging problem that has been building for months that you've been hoping would simply go away? Merely acknowledging the bigger issue will take some pressure off.

Could it be more than one thing?

Say you had a bad fight with your sister. It might be a simple case of cause and effect: You argued, and now you're angry. But the fight might have been aggravated by a problem you're dealing with at work or compounded by the fact that your father is sick. In those instances, you might be angry but also feel sad or hopeless. It's common to have multiple emotions cropping up at the same time. When you have two or more pressing problems bringing you down, try to address them one by one.

step 2: calm down

Start by taking a few deep breaths to get your emotions under control. Then choose one or more of the following techniques to help clear your mind.

Focus on breathing

Take 10 deep breaths. Breathing may help restore the balance between the parasympathetic (or restorative) and sympathetic (fight-or-flight) nervous systems, buffering your body's natural reaction to stressful situations, says Brian Knutson, an assistant professor of psychology and neuroscience at Stanford University.

Make a pie chart

Draw a circle and create slices of a pie chart to represent all the things that are upsetting you, suggests Kase. Include everything you can think of, even if it's as mundane as the nonstop rain outside. The act of presenting your concerns visually clarifies things, she says, making the problems easier to identify and therefore to manage.

Find a quiet place

"Ideally, go someplace where you can have privacy to shut down the stimulation to your brain," says Pierce Howard, a cognitive psychologist in Charlotte, North Carolina, and the author of *The Owners Manual for the Brain*, 3rd edition (Bard, \$30). If you're at a busy place, like your office or a restaurant, he suggests, head to the bathroom and take a few minutes for yourself. If you're at home, go to your bedroom or a place that feels comforting.

Distract yourself

Read a favorite funny website, play with your dog, fold laundry, or wash dishes for a few minutes. "Diversions allow your emotions to calm down," says Peter Ubel, a professor of medicine and psychology at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. "And because your brain keeps processing the problem even when you're not consciously



thinking about it, you'll be better able to deal with the issue once you return to it."

Get some exercise

If possible, go out for a brisk walk, or do some stretches or yoga poses. "Just 10 minutes of an active and distracting activity breaks the flow of rumination and lifts people's moods," says Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, a professor of psychology at Yale University and the author of *Eating, Drinking, Overthinking* (Henry Holt, \$24). "This leads them to think more clearly."

Blow off steam

Call a patient friend. Be sure to tell her you're not trying to fix anything—you just want a listener. "Talking through your concerns makes them seem more manageable," says Kase. "But once you've vented, it's important to let it go."

chill-out tricks

Think *you* get overwhelmed? Here's how four high-pressured women cope with stress.

Jeannette Gaudry Haynie, U.S. Marine attack-helicopter pilot, San Diego: "I either go into my car and scream at the top of my lungs for about 15 seconds or find something that will make me laugh my butt off for a few minutes."

Gail Tusan Washington, superior court judge, Atlanta: "I call a recess, retreat to my chambers, and recite an affirmation to myself. Then I hum for a minute or two to restore the calm I need to make good decisions."

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step 3: create a strategy

The tips below will help you fix the situation that caused your bad mood. Do all three in sequence. If you're still in a funk, consider making an appointment with a therapist.

Talk to a problem-solver

"People often think they should be able to handle problems on their own, and they don't want to burden others," says Kase. "But it's easier to strategize with support." Discuss things you can do to feel better as well as fix the problem.

Make a list

It should include things that will make you feel better, like sending flowers to your husband, calling Dad's doctor to discuss his progress, or going to the gym at lunchtime. "Lists force you to structure your concerns and help you move into problem-solving mode," says Nolen-Hoeksema. Number the items in the order that you want to accomplish them.

Visualize your ideal

Take a few minutes to close your eyes and picture what you want in the moment, as if it's actually happening. This visualization technique is "basically a form of rehearsal," says Howard. For instance, after you and your sister argue, imagine the two of you having a great time over dinner at your favorite restaurant. The memories of the fight will be replaced by a positive picture of harmony and fun.

chill-out tricks

(continued)

Regina Miranda, police officer, New York City:

"I play with my two Weimaraners. They're so happy to see me that any work or personal concerns are replaced with the energy I need for another day."

Leah Hooper, public-school teacher, Bronx, New York:

"I use a trick my mom taught me. I breathe in through my nose with my mouth closed, imagining that I'm smelling a bouquet of flowers. Then I exhale through my mouth like I'm blowing out birthday candles. It helps me calm down and restores a sense of control."



In 15 minutes

Your blood cells circulate around your entire body about 15 times when you're at rest and about 30 times during intense exercise.