



# Understanding negative emotions

*Mental Health Foundation of Australia (Vic)*

A negative emotion can be described as any feeling which causes you to feel miserable, undermine your confidence, or feel negatively toward yourself or others. Obvious emotions are hate, anger, jealousy and sadness.

Negative emotions are not bad: the sadness involved with bereavement is natural and appropriate. What causes problems with negative emotions is how we express them. An example of expressing emotions in an inappropriate way is anger with violence, or anger expressed by ignoring or avoiding a person or situation causing bad feelings. An appropriate way of expressing anger could be by using assertiveness to express anger through nonaggressive language, facial expressions and tone of voice.

Strong negative emotions can impair people's ability to think rationally and see the situation in its true perspective. People see only what they want to see, or remember only what they want to remember, thus perpetuating the grief of anger. Negative emotions can be acute (momentary), involving a brief episode, or they can go on for long periods of time causing constant discomfort (chronic).

The longer a negative emotion goes

on, the more it becomes an entrenched pattern of thinking and the harder it becomes to change. If it's not attended to it can become an illness, like depression, and require drug treatment or counselling.

Often we lack the coping skills to deal with negative emotions. In today's complicated society with job insecurity, confusion over gender roles and relationship difficulties, these skills are invaluable.

## How can we cope with negative emotions?

- Don't catastrophise (blow things out of proportion and constantly go over and over them in your head). This is guaranteed to keep your arousal levels topped up and help you feel bad. Try to be rational 'I know I'm bound to feel bad from time to time but I can cope, so what can I do to make myself feel better now' (walk, read, music, etc).
- Learn a relaxation technique. Regular relaxation reduces stress levels and allows you to cope better with negative emotions.
- Learn about the process involved in grief and loss.
- Exercise. Exercising briskly for 20 minutes, three times a week can lift your mood by releasing 'feel good'

chemicals in your brain called 'endogenous opiates'. The effect is accumulative so allow a couple of weeks to begin to feel the real benefits. Walk up to 20 minutes a day.

- Let go of the past. Constantly going over negative events in the past robs you of the present and makes you feel bad.
- Don't be embarrassed to seek professional help. Ask your doctor, citizens advice bureau or community health centre. They can refer you to a counsellor or help you find what you're looking for (perhaps a support group).
- Life is not always easy. However, you have a right to comfortable emotions for as much time as is possible. Information about coping skills and the right help from the right people and professionals can go a long way toward helping you deal with negative emotions.

## Resources

Mental Health Foundation of Australia:  
www.mentalhealthvic.org.au

VIC: (03) 9427 0406

NSW: (02) 9816 1611

QLD: (07) 3358 4988

SA: (08) 8221 5166

WA: (09) 9420 7277

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## Six ways to keep mentally healthy

**1** We all relax in different ways. Work out how you relax and do it regularly, not just when you need it. Remember that sleep is very important.

**2** Try to spend time with good company: friends, neighbours, family, work colleagues and school friends.

**3** Spend time regularly with yourself, away from all demands. Look after yourself by thinking of things you might enjoy such as reading a book, taking a walk and listening to music.

**4** Imagine some simple changes to your routines which may increase your positive feelings. Get out of bed earlier, meet some new people or read a daily newspaper.

**5** If you are worrying about something, try to understand your thoughts and the reasons for them by writing the problem down and talking to someone about the problem.

**6** Set some realistic goals for yourself and once achieved, set new ones.

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