Low mood cycle

Map one pattern. Needed rest and protection from real overload are not automatically avoidance.

Editable PDF: replace or delete the fictional examples. Blank PDF: print and write. Guidance follows.

Situation or difficulty

What was happening in my life?

e.g. A difficult week and a cancelled plan.

Low mood and thoughts

How did I feel and what went through my mind?

e.g. Low and tired. No one wants to see me.

Withdrawal or rumination

What did I put off, stop doing or dwell on?

e.g. Stay in bed; stop replying to friends.

Immediate effect

What felt easier, or what changed, in the short term?

e.g. No need to make an effort or face a possible rejection.

Later effect on life and mood

Less connection, pleasure, progress or another effect?

e.g. More isolated; less enjoyment and lower mood.

The return arrow shows how later effects can keep the pattern going.

A behavioural activation episode map, informed by Martell, Dimidjian & Herman-Dunn (2022).

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Using this resource

Low mood cycle

What this helps with

With low mood, you may withdraw or repeatedly ask why you feel this way. These responses are understandable attempts to manage something painful. The useful question is what they do over time: do they help solve a problem, or leave you more disconnected and stuck? This worksheet maps one episode and helps identify where a different response could be explored. The aim is not to ban thinking or rest. It is to notice when a response has stopped helping and make room for another choice.

How to use it

1. Start with one situation or difficulty.
2. Write the low mood and thoughts that followed.
3. Notice withdrawal, things you stopped doing or repeated dwelling on problems.
4. Record what changed immediately, then the later effects on connection, enjoyment, progress and mood.
5. Follow the return arrow. A small, supported activity can be planned on the separate activity or graded-task sheet. Needed rest, disability adjustments and protection from real overload still matter.

A fictional worked example

After a job rejection, Kai spends the evening asking why he always gets things wrong. He stays in his room and ignores a message from a friend. At first he avoids explaining the disappointment, but later feels more alone and has no clearer plan. His map distinguishes the real problem of finding work from the unanswerable claim that he always fails. One practical action is to ask about interview feedback tomorrow. For this evening he chooses to reply to his friend and make something to eat. The disappointment remains, but he has interrupted a pattern that was taking him further from support and useful action.

Keep in mind

Withdrawal can sometimes protect you from genuine overload or harm, and rest may be necessary. Consider context before labelling a response unhelpful. If repeated thinking concerns trauma, major loss or persistent severe distress, seek appropriate support rather than forcing an activity as the only response.

Sources and attribution

Martell, C. R., Dimidjian, S., & Herman-Dunn, R. (2022). Behavioral activation for depression: A clinician's guide (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

NICE (2022). Depression in adults: treatment and management (NG222).

Original material informed by the sources above. No outside organisation endorses this worksheet.

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