

# Understanding low mood

Guidance manual for professionals and  
education staff



## Preface

This guidance manual gives some suggestions and advice around introducing each session of the 'Understanding Low Mood' Workbook. Please adapt the content of your sessions to best fit the needs of your young person and do not feel you have to adhere to each plan prescriptively. It's important that you familiarise yourself with the workbook and exercises before introducing them in session so that there is more space for discussion and reflection.

## Context

Low mood can be a 'vicious cycle' where feelings of sadness and depression leads to reduced motivation and reduced activity. The less we do, the worse we feel. Because of this cycle, low mood often gets in the way of young people building the life they want to live. The approach used in this workbook is based on principles that our ability to feel better has a lot to do with the way we live our life on a day-to-day basis. In order to fully understand this, the workbook is structured around identifying how young people spend their time and how we might be able to introduce some changes into their daily lives so that the young person is able to do more of what matters to them. This is with the understanding that doing more of what matters will help young person to think more positively and feel better. With this approach it is hoped that the **vicious cycle of low mood** can be reversed and become a **positive spiral of activity** instead.

# Session one: What is low mood?

## Aims of session:

- Introduce the workbook.
- Open up discussion about the definition of low mood and variations in presentations.
- Support young people to begin identifying the thoughts, physical sensations and behaviours that accompany low mood.

**Introduction:** Introduce the workbook making sure to normalise the difficulties that many young people have with understanding and managing low mood.

**Practical components:** Emphasise the importance of following each session in order. Introduce the idea of take-home tasks and discuss the support you will be providing. When introducing the take-home tasks it can be helpful to ask the young person to think back on a skill that they have learnt (e.g. a sport or musical instrument) and prompt them to think about what helped them to become proficient in this (often practice, time and guidance from others). Draw parallels between learning that skill and mastering the skills in the workbook. Ensure that you emphasise that the workbook alone is not a 'magic cure' but that with practice they have been shown to be helpful for lots of young people.

**Support team:** Normalise asking for support if needed. Raise the possibility that learning to understand our emotions particularly those related to low mood may make us more aware of the difficult thoughts and feelings we are experiencing. Remind them that if they notice feeling upset they can seek support from a parent, tutor or yourself.



## Exercise one: My workbook plan

To support engagement and motivation encourage the young person to make a plan of when they are going to complete the take home tasks.

**Psychoeducation about low mood:** This session focuses on learning about signs of low mood and how this may relate to the young person. It can be helpful to identify low mood as a response to loss and a signal to seek emotional support from others. Explore their understanding of loss-not just bereavement but loss of routine, health, friendships, identity etc. Discussing the differences between low mood in response to acute event versus feelings of low mood that are persistent and impacting on quality of life can help gauge where the young person is at that you are working with.



## Exercise two: Circling signs or indicators of low mood

This task involves the young person circling the emojis that may be related to low mood. The answers are on the next page for the young person. Answer: all of the emojis are demonstrating a sign or indicator of low mood.

Signs of low mood from YoungMinds if further prompts needed:

- Not wanting to do things that you previously enjoyed
- Avoiding friends or social situations
- Sleeping more or less than normal
- Eating more or less than normal
- Feeling irritable, upset, miserable or lonely

- Being self-critical
- Feeling hopeless
- Maybe wanting to self-harm
- Feeling tired and not having any energy

Following this exercise there is some information that talks about how signs or symptoms can perpetuate low mood. There is a diagram on page 5 that can help start to introduce the 'vicious cycle of low mood'. Read through the text with the young person and see if they notice any signs they have noticed to indicate their own cycle.



### Exercise three: Identifying activities

As this workbook has a large focus on doing more of what you enjoy it is important to link in with the young person to get a sense of their interests and to see if low mood has had an impact on their activity levels. Using the table under exercise three help the young person to reflect on activities they used to or do like doing and see if there are any they have stopped recently. It is important to focus on what they might do to try and get back to doing things they like so help them to think of some goals to write down in the right hand column. There are some cartoon images underneath the table that can help with generating discussion if the young person is struggling to think of any.



### Take home task: Body map

To increase motivation, talk through the task and discuss the rationale for it. Remind them that this is not homework and that there are no 'right or wrong' answers. The aim of this task is to encourage young people to understand how low mood might be felt in their own body. Ask the young person to consider some of the signs that were explored in the session today and to see which ones were relevant to them. They can then map this on the body map and rate how often they feel these physical symptoms using the words sometimes, often or always and writing these next to each sign.

**Feedback:** Elicit feedback about what was helpful, unhelpful and what could be done differently next time about today's session. Encourage the young person to articulate what their take home message is from the session before ending the meeting.

# Session two: Introducing 'the vicious cycle' of low mood

## Aims of session:

- Map out the 'vicious cycle' of low mood.
- Psychoeducation around inactivity and the maintenance of low mood.

**Check in:** Outcome measures, review risk and how the young person's week has been. Check if young person has anything to add to the session agenda.

**Take home task review:** Review the 'Body Map' take home task. Enquire about the ease of the task and learning taken from this. Explore if young person was surprised by any of their answers or if they were aware these signs might have been linked to low mood. Open up discussion about how they found the task and any learning taken from this. Start to elicit links around bodily sensation and low mood and how this might impact on them. For example some young people may see their friends less as they feel tired all the time and others might skip college because they don't feel like going. Starting to form these links between the feelings of low mood, the bodily sensations and the impact of this will begin to outline the vicious cycle for the young person. Acknowledge that when first exploring how low mood is affecting them, it can be difficult to focus on the feelings and bodily sensations and behaviours accompanying these. It is positive they are taking steps to work on how they are feeling to change this. Use session 7 problem solving support where difficulties arise with completing take home tasks

**Introducing the session:** Introducing the cycle of low mood and how activity can help break this cycle. Introduce the notion that low mood can often get in the way of young people building the life they want to live.

Use the diagrams within the workbook to help describe this vicious cycle of low mood and how activity can break the cycle.



## Exercise four: Mapping your own 'vicious cycle of low mood'

- Support the young person to think about a time they either felt low in mood or observed someone feeling sad. Map out the thoughts, feelings, sensations and behaviours accompanying this using the diagrams on the page before as a guide.
- Think about the links between thoughts, feelings and behaviour and how we can become 'stuck' in a vicious cycle where the way we think, or the things we do keep the low-mood going.
- Introduce hope that strategies covered in sessions will support them to break this cycle.
- See if they are able to turn this cycle into a positive one of activity using specific examples from their own experiences.

## Inactivity and low mood:

- Gauge current activity levels of young person. If reduced activity explore reasons behind this e.g. mood related/circumstance related.
- Discuss the impact of low-mood on motivation, energy and activity levels.
- Normalise that it's understandable if feeling low may not want to do very much but elicit long-term

impact of this from young person e.g. how would not seeing your friends impact your mood? If you continued to do fewer and fewer activities what would happen to your mood?.

- Key point to emphasise is that often people want to wait until they feel better before doing more, but we have to do more in order to feel better. Change behaviour to impact mood.



### Exercise five:

Help the young person to write down how the low mood and inactivity might be impacting on their life in the text box. In the following box ask the young person 'if I had a magic wand and waved it what would your life look like if you felt better?' Get them to write their answer in the next box.



### Take home task: Logging activity

This week's take home task will be about logging activities throughout the week on the activity logging sheet to see how much time the young person spends doing activities. This log will be an important part of future sessions so the young person should be positively encouraged to try and do this daily using the correct times so that it is accurate. Logging mood daily using a scale of 0-10 is also part of this task and can help track progress as the sessions go on.

**Feedback:** Elicit feedback about what was helpful, unhelpful and what could be done differently next time. Encourage young person to articulate what their take home message is from the session.

# Session three: What can affect my mood?

## Aims of session:

- Introduce biological, psychological and social factors that can effect or contribute to low mood.
- Get the young person to reflect on what can effect their mood based on the learning from the session.
- Help the young person to identify ways to maintain a healthy balance, including sleep hygiene and food.

**Check in:** Outcome measures, review risk and how week has been. Check if young person has anything to add to the session agenda.

**Take home task review:** Review the 'Activity Log' together. Open up discussion about how they found the task of completing the log and if there was any learning taken from this. Start to elicit ideas around whether they enjoyed any activities and what stood out to them from completing the log.

**Introducing the session:** The session today focuses on understanding what factors might have contributed to the young person feeling low in mood. Introduce idea that there is rarely 'one cause' to low mood and that it can be a mixture of biological, psychological and social factors.

**Bio-psycho-social factors:** Review the psychological and social factors first, using questioning skills to explore how relevant these factors feel to the young person. Support them to circle any factors that apply to them and elicit from young person whether there is anything else they can think of that might have caused them to feel low in mood. Normalise and validate feelings as they arise (e.g. "It is understandable that you have felt low after losing a family member", "It is very common for young people to find this a difficult time").

Discuss biological factors including the role of neurotransmitters. Review the information on Dopamine and Serotonin and support the young person to think about the role these play in regulating mood by asking what might happen if they had low levels of Dopamine/Serotonin. Write any answers in the box below the table. Emphasise that there are things we can do to get a 'boost' of dopamine and serotonin by doing more. The more we do the more opportunity we have to feel a sense of reward, enjoyment and pleasure all of which help with our mood.



### Exercise six:

Support the young person to write three examples of what can improve their mood and what can make them feel worse.



### Exercise seven:

Help the young person to write three goals for themselves that might help them improve their mood.



### Take home task:

Support the young person to plan when they are going to work towards completing the above goals over the next week. Write this plan into the diary and encourage them to continue monitoring other activities completed across the week to help draw links between mood and activity. Ask young person to keep a daily 0-10 rating of mood, recording this in the 'Daily Mood Monitoring' table.

**Feedback:** Elicit feedback about what was helpful, unhelpful and what could be done differently next time. Encourage young person to articulate what their take home message is from the session.



# Session four: The importance of activities

## Aims of session:

- To create an awareness of how the young person spends their time.
- To begin to create links between how the young person spends their time and their mood.
- To create a shared understanding about what the young person feels matters to them.

**Check in:** Outcome measures, review risk and how week has been. Check if young person has anything to add to the session agenda.

**Take home task review:** Review Take Home Task 'Activity Log'. Open up discussion about how they found the task and any learning taken from this. Start to elicit links around activity and mood. Were they able to complete their goals as planned? If not problem solve what made this difficult using session seven to support this discussion.

**Introducing the session:** This session will focus on the young person's current activity levels and also what the young person likes to do. Having an understanding of how the young person spends their time and what they do enjoy (or used to enjoy) can help us think about integrating meaningful activities over the coming weeks, or trying to increase enjoyment levels from these.

**Activity grading:** Support the young person to think about a time where they have enjoyed an activity e.g. engaging in a hobby, a sport or a day out. Ask them to write down the memory in the box on page 18. Elicit as much information about this memory as possible so that the young person can clearly visualise this time. Ask about senses (what could you smell, see, touch, hear etc.), who they were with, what was the best part about this memory and why. Following this, ask the young person how they feel now recalling this memory. Our hope is that remembering an enjoyable time in their life will help make links between engaging in activity can help improve mood.

Using the list of enjoyable activities, help the young person to underline activities that they do enjoy or used to enjoy. This should lead nicely on to discussing any other activities that the young person likes that are missing from the list. If the young person is struggling to think of any use the images around the page to help create discussion about activities and hobbies they maybe once had. Don't be afraid to ask further questions about expression of interests in some areas as this may help the young person to remember other activities they like.



## Exercise eight:

This exercise helps the young person to map out a time when they have felt low in mood. This is a useful tool for the young person to understand the links between thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and behaviours. It is a useful exercise to revisit later in sessions to review if the young person still feels the same as your sessions continue. The focus of the work you will do will look at changing the behaviours box, to break the cycle. Reflective questions about what the cycle might look like if it was a positive spiral of activity (e.g. engaging in one of the enjoyable activities they have underlined) rather than a vicious cycle of low mood can help stimulate discussion.



### Exercise nine:

For this activity the young person will grade activities from favourite to least favourite. Using the images alongside this exercise as well as answers from the previous exercises, help the young person to rank what activities they enjoy from most to least. It is their choice which activities they would look to include in the ranking. To get the most out of this activity it would be helpful the young person can think of as many activities that they enjoy to populate the table with, use previous discussions and exercises from the session to facilitate suggestions if the young person feels 'stuck'.

Now you have rated these activities in order from highest enjoyment to lowest see if the young person can identify any activities that they are currently doing by circling them. Are there any activities that they have stopped doing that they used to like? Is there anything that they feel they want to get back to? Is the reason they stopped related to their low mood?



### Take home task:

- Discuss increasing enjoyable activities across week (if not currently engaging in many). Degree of flexibility needed if young person is very active.
- Emphasise that each person enjoys different things so needs to be individualised.
- Discuss the activity log as a way to review the impact of doing these activities. Ratings on a scale of 0-10, where 0=very low and 10=happy.
- Ask the young person to continue logging their mood daily using a scale of 0-10 to help track progress and form links between mood and activity levels.

**Feedback:** Elicit feedback about what was helpful, unhelpful and what could be done differently next time. Encourage young person to articulate what their take home message is from the session.

# Session five: Understanding values

## Aims of session:

- To gather a sense of what values are and what matters to the young person and why from their own perspective (rather than what others may say should matter)
- To form links between values activities and changes in mood
- To review the activity log together to think about introducing valued activities into daily life
- If the activity log is not complete to try work together to understand the barriers to its completion and encourage collaboration with work (session 7 should be completed if activity log not completed).

**Check in:** Outcome measures, review risk and how week has been. Check if young person has anything to add to the session agenda.

**Take home task review:** Review the 'Activity Log' together. Open up discussion about how they found the task of completing the log and if there was any learning taken from this. Start to elicit ideas around whether they enjoyed any activities and what stood out to them from completing the log.

**Introducing the session:** Understanding the link between engaging in meaningful activity our mood by looking at your values and whether you are living in line with these values at the moment.

**Psychoeducation about values:** Values differ from goals. Goals are about achieving and working towards something whereas values are about what matters to us, what we stand for and what gives our life meaning. Values can be linked to relationships (e.g. being a caring friend), our identity (e.g. creative) or other important areas of our life (e.g. learning and education). Ideally our goals, actions and behaviours are guided by our values so for example if I value learning then I will invest time in completing my coursework and researching areas of interest. My goal therefore might be to spend 30 extra minutes a day reading around a specific subject areas. When our actions or behaviour do not align with our values this can lead to us feeling low in mood, unrewarded and unsatisfied.



## Exercise ten:

Encourage the young person to think of an activity for each box of the LAVA sheet that matters to them. Make sure these values are true to the young person and not something they think they should say. If the young person can think of one for each category this will be enough to create more discussion.

Use this time to think about some of the things the young person has identified. Is there an even balance amongst the categories? Is one box taking over more than the other? Encourage the young person to try and create a balanced view of these activities and think about planning these in to their week.



## Exercise eleven:

Looking at the activity log together ask the young person how many of their activities align with their LAVA values inventory? Support them to think how they may be able to add more of their valued activities into their week using the SMART goal (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time orientated) framework. Write these goals in the goal box.



## Take home task: My activity log

- Discuss increasing valued activities across week and think about one from each category
- This week as the young person to tick the Achievement, Closeness, Enjoyment or Important box when they felt an activity met these for them. This will be looked at more in the following week.
- Again continue to monitor mood across each day using a scale of 0-10.
- Set SMART goal to include at least one valued activity extra that week.

**Feedback:** Elicit feedback about what was helpful, unhelpful and what could be done differently next time. Encourage young person to articulate what their take home message is from the session.

## Session six: Targeted activities

### Aims of session:

- Review activity monitoring and understand the importance of targeted activities.
- Introduce 'ACE' scoring for activities.
- Plan for high scoring activities for the next week.

**Check in:** Outcome measures, review risk and how week has been. Check if young person has anything to add to the session agenda.

**Take home task review:** Review the activity monitoring sheet for the week with the young person. Had they managed to achieve the goal that was set? If so this should be emphasised and positively encouraged. If not it may be a good idea to spend a bit of time understanding what might have prevented the completion of this and how they can overcome any obstacles this week (use session 7 problem solving support where difficulties arise with completing take home tasks).

**Introducing the session:** Ask the young person about their 'ACE' activities from their take home task. ACE stands for 'Achievement', 'Closeness with others' and 'Enjoyment'. A=Sense of Achievement, C=Feeling Closeness with others and E=A Sense of Enjoyment. Explain to the young person they can use these areas to score activities (0-10) and when we have a lot of 'ACE' high scoring activities within our week we are more likely to feel happier than when we do activities with low 'ACE' scores. The need to have a balance of ACE scores is also important throughout the week.

See if you can go through the activity diary with the young person to mark a score out of 10 for each ACE. Where there is a high score this activity should be emphasised as something to try and plan for the next week if appropriate. Where there is a low score it might be worth exploring the reason for this such as whether the activity is required or how it might be made better.

Read through the Dan and Ellie examples together to help the young person identify imbalances in activity logs. Elicit discussion around the examples asking questions such as how the young person might help Dan and Ellie problem solve the things they may need support to do. Get the young person's feedback on the changes Dan and Ellie made and whether they could make similar changes? If not why not? Use the problem solving skills in session 7 if needed.



### Exercise twelve:

Help the young person to set two goals for the following week to help create balance in their own activity log.

**Review:** As this is approximately the half way point of this workbook it is worth reviewing the body map to see if the young person is still experiencing signs of low mood. See if the young person can rate the frequency of these feelings again using the words sometimes, often or always. It might be a good idea to use a different coloured pen to see the differences from then and now.

If feelings has improved from week one then it is worth noting this to the young person to emphasise progress. Equally if nothing has changed it would be worth reflecting this back to the young person to see what might be preventing progress. It may be worth revisiting the 'vicious cycle of low mood' if the young person is struggling to complete activities because of how they feel or even session 7 for problem solving support if there is a difficulty in completing the take home tasks.



## Take home task: My activity log

- To complete an activity log for the week using ACE scoring (0-10)
- Set a SMART goal to include at least one targeted activity extra that week
- Continue monitoring mood daily.

**Feedback:** Elicit feedback about what was helpful, unhelpful and what could be done differently next time. Encourage young person to articulate what their take home message is from the session.

## Session seven: Problem solving

**This session should be skipped if there have not been any difficulties completing the work book or engaging in take home tasks.**

**This session can be completed at any time during working with the young person. It is designed to be used if difficulties arise with engagement or completing take home tasks to try and understand and work around barriers to engagement.**

### **Aims of session:**

- To think collaboratively about what barriers there may be that could be getting in the way of engagement.
- To create time and space to problem solve together around these difficulties to overcome barriers.

**Check in:** Outcome measures, review risk and how week has been. Check if young person has anything to add to the session agenda.

**Take home task review:** This session would usually be completed if there has been difficulty completing homework tasks. If this is the case explaining the use of problem-solving techniques together to try and understand barriers and try and work around these.

**Introducing the session:** Problem solving is a strategy we use to try and understand what may be getting in the way of accessing support or applying learnt strategies outside of the session. Problem solving support can help to identify what is preventing the young person from being able to fully engage and identify a clear plan that is agreed by both parties.

**Activity:** Using the flow chart to work through together to identify what the barriers are. When coming up with solutions this can be anything no matter how wacky. When picking the solution the young person should be encouraged to do this through self-discovery.

**Feedback:** Elicit feedback about what was helpful, unhelpful and what could be done differently next time. Encourage young person to articulate what their take home message is from the session. The action plan should form basis of the take home task for the week.

# Session eight: Relapse prevention plan

## Aims of session:

- To review progress made so far throughout the work book
- To look at how to maintain progress or to build on this
- Identify how to access support in future if this is required.

**Check in:** Outcome measures, review risk and how week has been. Check if young person has anything to add to the session agenda.

**Take home task review:** Review activity log together, mood and ACE scores. Has this increased since starting to log activity? Has mood improved too? Are there any links between certain activities and increase in mood. What does the young person understand by this?

**Introducing the session:** Look together at the activity logs. Has there been a pattern to certain activities? How have things changed? Do certain activities hold higher scores than others? Can you review the outcome measures too? Review the body sheet together, does this still hold true for the young person or is it less intense? Think of using the sometimes, often and always words again to review signs and maybe write these in a different colour pen. Does the word never now come in when thinking about some of these signs? Introduce this word if this is now the case.

It is often the case that some people will have made some improvements in this time although will not be fully 'better'. Explain that it is very common for young people to still find some days harder than others. Emphasise the progress that has been made and how far they have come over the sessions. Based on the progress made so far, support young person to visualise how their mood might continue to improve if they continue to practice and implement the strategies learnt in the workbook. Any progress should be praised and attributed to the young person's efforts in and in between sessions.

Look together at writing a relapse prevention plan to continue to build on progress made or to maintain it. Work through the content in session eight to form the relapse prevention plan by asking the young person to fill in the boxes.

Read through the reviewing progress page together and signpost the young person to further reading and where they can get further support if required.

**Feedback:** Elicit feedback about what was helpful or unhelpful about your sessions together. Encourage young person to articulate what their take home message is from the session. We have come to the end of the work book now so any feedback on how they have found the sessions may help you with your future practice.