

The Mood Emergency Action Plan

What if it comes back? What if, despite all of your efforts, you have another depressive episode?

This is the question that most people fear. They may fear it so much that they don't even want to think about it. Planning for a relapse or recurrence seems self-defeating. *"Maybe if I just ignore the possibility it won't happen."* But the worry continues, and it may be strong enough to become a major risk factor for relapse. At the very least, it can slow down your recovery.

Having a plan of action in case your mood worsens can be one way of reducing this worry. Developing a positive coping plan may make it less likely that you will need to use it. And if for some reason the problem *does* return, having a plan can help you get assistance more quickly and reduce the length and depth of the bad patch.

Your Mood Emergency Action Plan should be clear, practical, and specific, and should take into account the factors that are really likely to help. Here are some examples:

George was feeling much better and was thinking about bringing his therapy sessions to a close. He was anxious, however, about the possibility of a relapse. Consequently, he asked his therapist if the last few sessions could be spaced further apart than usual: two weeks, then four, then six. He also asked whether, if he should begin feeling worse again, he could get in to see her without having to go through the agency's four-month wait list. His therapist agreed. Later, George suspected that having the door open to further sessions reduced his worry, and was part of the reason for his continued improvement.

David's episodes of depression had a history of coming on suddenly and violently, with symptoms of profound confusion and disorientation. He knew he should call his physician when this happened, but he would get too confused and disorganized to remember the number or get himself to the clinic. Part of his Mood Emergency Action Plan involved writing down the name, address, and phone number of his family physician and his psychiatrist, along with simple instructions on how to get to the office of each. He kept this information stored with cab fare under his phone. From then on, all he had to remember was to consult the list.

Your Mood Emergency Action Plan should consider the details of your own situation, and the factors most likely to help you. The goal is to develop a positive plan to get help, begin coping, and reduce stress as quickly as possible. Here are some suggestions:

Increase your rewards. If your mood declines, it will be important for you to care for yourself. You can do this by increasing the number of rewarding or pleasurable activities as much as possible – even if during the decline some things don't seem as much fun as usual. What could you do to build up the enjoyable side of your life if you notice your mood sliding? Be specific.

Reduce obligations. When your mood is in decline you are less able to handle a lot of obligations. Feeling overwhelmed is not going to help. Like a hot air balloon, you will want to be able to let go of a few sandbags when you feel yourself sinking. You should not get in the habit of dropping your responsibilities very often, but during a significant decline in mood you may need to do so. Some possibilities:

- An agreement with work to scale back tasks or hours if needed.
- An agreement with friends to provide baby-sitting relief.
- An understanding with family that sometimes you won't be cooking elaborate meals.
- A reserve fund to cover the cost of occasional housecleaning help.

How could you reduce your load in a mood emergency? What would you need to do in advance to make that possible?

Get professional help. The longer a problem goes without attention, the bigger the struggle to get back out of it. You won't want to seek help for every momentary mood dip, but if your mood declines sharply you might need to do so. Some ideas:

- Keep your list of caregivers (your physician(s), therapist, or others) with their phone numbers and addresses in a safe place that is easily accessible.
- Give your permission to one or two close friends or family members to tell you when you should seek help. Sometimes they can see this better than you can yourself.
- Before you end your contact with a therapist, ask if you can avoid the waiting list and get back into treatment quickly if the need arises.

Should things get worse, how could you get professional help quickly?

Get support. In the event of a major mood decline you will need the support of others. You may just want to talk with them, or you may wish them to do specific things such as taking you to get your groceries.

What types of support would be helpful for you in the event of a serious mood problem? How could you arrange for this in advance? Name names.

Manage your lifestyle. Allowing your self-care strategies (such as diet, exercise, and sleep schedule) to slip can contribute to a mood decline. As well, once a mood decline is underway you might find yourself neglecting your self-care, which will only make things worse. Based on your work in Chapter 12 (which focuses on lifestyle), which would be the most self-care strategies to push?

Remember: If you allow a slide in mood to carry you along, the natural pattern will be to isolate yourself, drop the sustaining elements of your life, and increase your negative automatic thoughts. You need a *plan* to help you reverse this trend.