

## Avoiding the Mood Checking Trap

Imagine that you have injured your elbow in such a way that it produces pain only when you put your arm behind your back. You see your doctor, who tells you that there is nothing to be done but wait, and that until it gets better you should not, let's say, play tennis. One morning you notice that you haven't had that pain for a while. Maybe it's gone. What would you do?

If you are like most people, you would try putting your arm behind your back. Your idea would be that if the pain comes back, the injury needs more time to heal. If you can't produce the pain then you must be cured. This is a perfectly reasonable strategy, one that even your physician might recommend.

Now imagine being depressed (as, indeed, perhaps you are). One morning you suddenly notice that you feel well. Maybe this is the day you have been waiting for. Maybe the depression is finally gone. Maybe you can take your life back. Or...maybe the depression is just temporarily hidden, and is about to return. What would you do?

The temptation for many people is to use the same strategy that they would use with their elbow: Try to produce the pain. The reasoning is that if you go looking for your depressed mood and cannot find it, then you are cured. If you do find it, you must still be depressed "underneath." How do you look for a depressed mood? You might think about all the depressing things that you normally think about when you are depressed: your failures, disappointments, losses, and fears.

The problem is that you *will* find the depression. Your mood will sink and your fears will be confirmed. *"No, I'm not better; the depression was just hiding."* But it is the strategy that is the problem. Checking for your elbow pain does not produce an elbow injury. Checking for the depression, however, involves a kind of thinking that is part of depression. So a strategy that works well for the body does not work for the mind. Being well won't mean that you *can't* make yourself miserable, only that you *don't* do so.

If you like, you can think of depression as a destination at the end of a road in your mind. When you are feeling better it can be tempting to go down that same road to see if depression still sits at the end of it. It does. Being well means traveling a different road: allowing yourself to think in a different way. Being well means allowing the boat named *Happiness* or *Contentment* or *Joy* to sail on your emotional river, without going searching for the boat named *Depression*.

You may have a hard time "letting go" of the depression without hunting for it. After all, what if it comes back? The first few times, it probably *will* return. Most people recover from depression in a halting, two steps forward and one step back manner. The first time you feel well won't be the last you see of the depression. It will rise up and seize your mind several more times before it releases you completely. The challenge is to face this fact, and to allow contentment, or good mood, to be on your river anyway, even though they may not stay for good just yet.

This approach goes against what every Canadian child learns. If ice has formed on the lake, then before you go skating you should stand at the edge and pound on the ice in an attempt to break through. If you can't, it's probably thick enough to support you.

With depression, you may find yourself supported by a buoyant mood. The temptation is to test its strength, to try to break through to depression. Don't. Just keep walking. *"But I could break through any second!"* Yes, and you probably will break through a few times. Keep walking anyway. Don't overcommit yourself, don't stop your medication or your self-care, don't assume you're cured just yet. But keep walking. Let yourself be supported for as long as it lasts. The longer the ice is undisturbed, the thicker and stronger it gets.

*If the depression isn't there, don't go looking for it.*

During depression, most people have moments (or, if they are lucky, hours) when they feel quite normal. When you feel somewhat better, do you notice the temptation to "go looking for the depression"? What do you think about?

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What happens when you think these thoughts? Does your mood begin to sink?

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If so, don't worry. This happens to most people. How could you remind yourself just to relax and enjoy the better mood, rather than bringing the depression back?