

THE **GOOD** SIDE



OF **BAD** MOODS



▶ TUNE OUT THE HAPPINESS PUSHERS, WHO STRIVE FOR A STEADY STATE OF ALL-IS-RIGHT-WITH-THE-WORLD JOY. FOR A PEACEFUL, HEALTHY, AND MORE SATISFYING LIFE, YOU NEED TO GET COMFORTABLE WITH YOUR LESS SUNNY FEELINGS, TOO. DON'T WORRY. BE GRUMPY.

by Kate Rockwood

Six years ago, when British journalist Ruth Whippman moved to the U.S. with her husband and children, she was surprised to find that small talk always seemed to turn to the same subject: happiness, and how to get more of it. It came up at the park with her mom friends, in lines at the grocery store, and one time—no lie—with her gynecologist in the middle of a Pap smear. “I was literally in the stirrups when she started talking to me about Gretchen Rubin’s book *Happier at Home*,” Whippman says. In England, she jokes, people settle for being reasonably content, but in America they seem determined to achieve round-the-clock smiley faces.

We’re obsessed, all right. A multi-billion-dollar industry now offers everything from apps that monitor how elated you feel throughout the day to professional joy-boosting coaches. Makes you wonder if the founding fathers knew just how frantic the pursuit of happiness might become.

Whippman spun her observations into the new book *America the Anxious*, which argues that the pressure to feel blissed-out all the time sets an impossibly high bar, unless you’re a Disney character. What’s worse, she adds, it “makes it seem as if there’s something wrong with feeling sad or anxious, that hard emotions have no place in our well-being.”

Many social psychologists share her concern that in our rush to prioritize happiness, we’re sacrificing our tolerance for so-called negative emotions like fear, sadness, or disgust.

That’s worrisome, because a typical bad mood can serve a purpose, directing our gaze to an aspect of our life that needs attention or, in some circumstances, prompting us to make more-cautious decisions. In fact, scientists say these darker moods do more than just affect *what* we think about; they affect *how* we think.

Studies have shown that a sour mood can sharpen our memory, the way we process information, and even how persuasive we can be. But in a culture that’s happiness or bust, we end up viewing the less cheery stops on the range of human emotions not as opportunities but as problems that need to be managed or eliminated, says Joseph Forgas, Ph.D., an Australian psychologist who’s studied mood for more than three decades.

To be clear, cultivating a positive outlook comes with definite benefits; it can certainly make life easier to cope with, and research has linked thinking positively with lower blood pressure, better heart health, a stronger immune system, and a longer lifespan. But contemplating the good is different from pursuing joy everyday, which, paradoxically, can make you less happy, not more. A study in the journal *Emotion* found that the more focused people were on their pursuit of happiness, the more their mood plummeted when stressed or faced with a challenge. When people are under inordinate pressure to be happy, it’s a lot easier to be disappointed, and they wind up feeling more inadequate and depressed than they would otherwise.

Besides, as anyone who has tried

to shove aside a blue mood can tell you, it will very often boomerang right back, demanding to be dealt with. “Research shows that if we push away our emotions, they come back amplified,” says Susan

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David, Ph.D., a psychology professor at Harvard Medical School and author of *Emotional Agility*. “So the idea that we can somehow shunt our negative emotions aside to be happy doesn’t add up.” In a larger sense, all this focus on happy-happy doesn’t seem to be paying off. Check the UN’s World Happiness Report, which ranks 155 countries by their feel-good levels. The U.S. has slipped from third place in 2007 to 14th in 2017, thanks to factors we can’t plaster over, like a deepening distrust of the government.

True happiness, psychologists argue, starts with recognizing that no emotion is inherently bad. In fact, researchers have found that it’s your attitude about your grouchy moods that can render them less or more harmful to your health. Read on to learn how a bad mood might affect you subconsciously—and how you can use it to your advantage. ➔

HOW A

# FUNK

WORKS IN YOUR FAVOR

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## SADNESS UPS YOUR TENACITY

In one study, Australian researcher Joseph Forgas found that people who felt sad stuck with difficult tasks longer than folks who were chipper. His theory: When we're in a good mood, there's less incentive to seek out the buzz that comes from aching a tough project. On the flip side, being down offers natural motivation to hustle and make a change for the better. So the next time you get a case of the sads, consider what it might be telling you about where to direct your focus and energy. It might be time to shake up parts of your life.

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## PESSIMISM HELPS YOU PREP

Seeing the glass as half empty could better prepare you for all the ways that glass could break. Some people are naturally good at using a strategy researchers have named defensive pessimism, which is basically thinking through everything that could go wrong in a situation and coming up with ways to handle it ahead of time. But anyone can learn how to do that. The benefit? It gives you a sense of control and could help you perform better than if you just look on the bright side and dive in blindly, hoping everything will work out.

2

## ENVY IGNITES AMBITION

Who doesn't face down the green-eyed monster now and then, especially with all that time we spend scrolling through our friends' well-curated lives on social media? Still, a little bit of envy IRL can be useful, prodding us to step up our game. When participants in a series of studies were pushed to think about the times they'd felt envious, their performance on tasks improved. To consciously get the same effect, first figure out exactly what you're envious of. It often has nothing to do with what someone else has; rather, it's your desire to feel a certain way, says Lori Deschene, author of *Tiny Buddha's Gratitude Journal*. Pin that down, she says, and you can stop attaching yourself to another person's vision and focus on getting what you need.

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## BUMMED OUT? YOU'LL SPOT LIARS BETTER

When we're in a happy bubble, we're more likely to take people at face value and assume that what they say matches up with their true intentions. Negative emotions, on the other hand, crank up our BS meter. In a study in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, participants who saw a sad flick before watching suspects get interrogated about a theft were significantly better at spotting liars than those who tuned in to a comedy. Sadness even cuts down on the so-called halo effect, in which folks tend to assume that someone with one positive feature (like a handsome face) is likely to have others, says Forgas. Lesson here: When you're feeling sunny, keep in mind that your judgment about the "great deal" you're being offered might be flawed.

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## BLUE MOODS LET YOU ZOOM IN ON DETAILS

When you're sitting on top of the world, it can be harder to see what's happening down below. Happiness can blur our focus and increase the odds that our brain will incorporate misleading info into our memory, Forgas says. Being in a bad mood, on the other hand, helps us ditch the rose-colored glasses and home in on details we'd otherwise miss. It might also give us a sharper eye for potential drawbacks. In a 2015 experiment, participants who were feeling fleeting anger, sadness, fear, or disgust were better at rejecting unfair offers than people who felt happy, surprised, or neutral in that moment. So as tempting as it is to Netflix your way through a blue mood, now might be a good time to knock out a discerning task, like browsing real estate listings.

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## ENNUI KICK-STARTS CREATIVITY

When British researchers asked their subjects to read or copy numbers from a phone book (yawn!) and then tested their creative thinking, they found that the bored participants had more ideas than the nonbored control group. In another study, people who watched a monotonous video before taking a creativity test performed better than those who were relaxed, elated, or distressed. It makes sense, because boredom prompts people to look for what's fresh and interesting, even if they have to create it for themselves. In fact, Todd Kashdan, Ph.D., coauthor of *The Upside of Your Dark Side*, recommends this mantra for anyone trying to be at ease with the doldrums: Boredom is the launching pad of new ideas.



That's the way the  
cookie crumbles, sure.  
But you're allowed to  
be bummed about it.

HOW TO

# COZY UP TO YOUR LESS-THAN-SUNNY SIDE

Ready to feel all the feels? Use these expert-approved moves to make peace with inevitable black clouds.

## stop being self-judgey

"Drop the struggle with yourself about whether your feelings are right or wrong or if you should or shouldn't feel a certain way," says Susan David. Instead, try to face your emotions without judgment, reminding yourself that "the sadness or anger is there for a reason," she says.

## show yourself some TLC

If your BFF was pissed or sad, would you offer her love and support or dismiss her feelings? Dumb question, right? It's high time you gave yourself the same courtesy you would show a dear pal, says Kristin Neff, Ph.D., author of *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*. One quick way to change your self-talk: Switch to the second person. ("You're feeling upset. It's OK to be angry.") "This will help you see your feelings more objectively," Neff says.

## put a label on it

If you're overwhelmed by your feelings, take the time to name them, says David—and get specific. Are you annoyed, frustrated, irritated? "When you label the emotion, you move it from that big, fuzzy space of all-consuming feeling into something that has parameters," she says. "Then you'll have an easier time examining it and moving on to solve the issue at hand." If you're having trouble ID'ing what you're feeling, grab a piece of paper or your laptop and try writing about it to focus your mind.

## find your seat

Sadness doesn't signal that your life is miserable, and anger doesn't mean that your relationships are doomed. But it can be hard to remember this in the moment. Enter meditation. "It helps you recognize that your thoughts and emotions aren't permanent," says Barbara Fredrickson, Ph.D., a social psychologist and author of *Positivity*. Doing five or 10 minutes a day may help you maintain that perspective, even when a bad mood hits.

## ask why

"Our difficult emotions are beacons that illuminate things we care about," David says. For instance, anger toward a spouse might be a signal that your trust and openness needs aren't being met. Let your pissy mood be a prompt to figure out which behaviors and beliefs are important to you, and then start strategizing how to better support them in your life. If you remember to ask yourself, *What can I learn from my response in this situation?*, says David, a bad mood can be a powerful teacher. ■