

STRESS

4 Steps to Dispel a Bad Mood

by Alexander Caillet, Jeremy Hirshberg, and Stefano Petti

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You know you're in a bad mood. You know it's hurting your performance at work. But how do you get yourself out of it?

We investigated how 740 leaders tried to solve this problem for themselves, and we presented their best practices in a previous HBR article. But when we took a deeper look, we discovered that many of these professionals had mixed results when they used these practices separately or infrequently. As a result, more than half of them couldn't shift their states of mind when they needed to.

It's clear that consistency and combination are the real keys to success. After years of experimenting, we've discovered that one specific sequence of practices can, when performed regularly, greatly increase a leader's ability to shift into the productive state of mind we refer to as CHE - calm, happy and energized. We call this the 4-Step Reset:

1. Engage breathing

Breathing can help you achieve a physiological condition called coherence, which leads to improved mental clarity, focus, emotional stability, and decision making. During coherence, the sympathetic (speeding up) and parasympathetic (slowing down) branches of the autonomic nervous system are working in reciprocity. When this happens our heart rate follows the same pattern—it speeds up and then slows down. Slower, deeper breathing at a constant rate can help induce coherence because when we inhale, our heart rate increases and when we exhale it decreases, thereby helping our nervous system achieve this balance.

Lisa Kelly Crowell, vice president for human resources at the Boston Medical Center, often uses coherent breathing at work to refocus. “It frees up my brain capacity to think clearly and make different types of decisions faster,” she explains. “It takes out all the noise and crunching of my mental gears.”

2. Activate a positive feeling

With breathing engaged, begin to quietly focus on a person, place, or thing you truly appreciate and/or are grateful for. Make sure you reactivate the actual feelings they elicit in you so that you reexperience them. Consider using visual and tactile cues (e.g. photographs, drawings, special objects, letters) and external stimuli like nature and music and to deepen the feeling. The idea is to stimulate the release of neurochemicals, such as dopamine and serotonin, and hormones, such as oxytocin. These can collectively improve our mood and outlook, and help us remain alert, curious and engaged.

Megan Griffault, global HR director for FMC Agricultural Solutions describes this step as “taking a moment to tap into a positive feeling or appreciation.” When she does it, she says she’s able to approach situations and issues “from a more subjective and calm state of mind, which almost always produces better results.”

3. Reframe thinking

Next, ask yourself one or more questions to assess your current thinking and help you decide if different thoughts might be more beneficial in your current situation. Here are a few suggestions:

- What else is possible here?
- What is the opportunity in this situation?
- What really matters right now?
- What could I learn in this moment?
- What does my heart say? What does my gut say?
- What is a more useful/constructive/positive approach?
- What is the most desirable outcome?

Jim O’Connor, vice president of Timberland PRO describes himself as an optimistic and upbeat leader who sometimes slips into negative thinking. When that happens, he challenges himself with these and other reframing questions: “The first two steps of the reset have become automatic. But then I consciously take a look at my thinking so that I can shift it and keep my mind in a positive state.”

4. Reengage action

With breathing engaged, a positive feeling activated, and reframed thoughts emerging, the fourth step is to re-engage with a new attitude and behaviors and perhaps a different course of action.

To be fair, this process is easier explained than done. It takes time and practice to master the ability to shift your state of mind and create sustainable change in your emotions, words, and deeds. But, as Hilary Ware, senior vice president of Bristow Group, Inc. says, “The key to strong leadership is understanding that performance is linked to a clear and balanced state of mind.” The 4-Step Reset is a simple way to help break your bad habits, move toward greater calm, happiness, and energy, and become more effective as a result.



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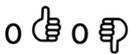
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Sai Bhupalam 2 days ago

This kind of intervention has been put forth a while ago by Rick Hanson (Neuropsychologist) and many others such as Rollin McCraty and Doc Childre in their article titled "The Appreciative Heart." Many other researchers of Positive Psychology have also put forth similar interventions and they do make an objective case. It is not a Pollyanna-ish, no negativity or no acknowledgment of the fact that we still do not know everything about the brain chemicals and their effects. For instance, Oxytocin has its benefits and drawbacks, so all research must be taken with a grain of salt as it is common to see it being refuted by scholars from the same discipline.

Step 1 has been recommended by many Eastern practices, especially Yoga,. Step 2 is a major topic researched by Barbara Fredrickson who put forth her "Broaden and Build" Theory and it leads to Steps 3 & 4. Add to this the components of Emotional Intelligence and it makes a lot of sense. These practices are truly effective and can make a huge impact on our daily well-being.

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