

The Upside of Being in a Bad Mood

Some people perform better while going through a bad mood, but others lose their focus.

By [Ruben Castaneda](#), Staff Writer Aug. 20, 2018, at 3:21 p.m.

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Even when you're feeling your worst, remind yourself that your mood and emotions are temporary. (GETTY IMAGES)

YOUR SIGNIFICANT OTHER snaps at you for failing to stop at the dry cleaners. The mechanic you left your car with for an oil change calls to tell you that your vehicle has a leak that will cost a couple hundred bucks to fix. A highly efficient parking enforcement officer slaps a ticket on your windshield two minutes after the meter expired. The toppings are all wrong on your delivery of takeout pizza. The sports team you've rooted for your whole life loses a championship game or series.

These are some of the common life disappointments that can flip your mood from good or neutral to bad. For some people, that may be enough to [compromise their brain's executive function abilities](#), including the skills of focusing, prioritizing daily responsibilities and efficiently managing time, suggests research published in February 2018 in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*. However, for high-reactive individuals – whose emotional responses to events tend to be rapid, intense and

enduring – there's a "silver lining," says Tara McAuley, a psychology professor at the University of Waterloo in Canada and one of the co-authors of the study.

"If you're highly reactive, [being in a bad mood] may be something you're more accustomed to," McAuley says. "So when something happens that sends you into a bad mood, it's less distracting and distressing than it would be for someone who's low-reactive." Being high-reactive doesn't necessarily translate to losing your temper or lashing out, she says; it doesn't mean you transform from mild-mannered Bruce Banner to the Hulk [when something upsets you](#). Rather, the term applies to people who feel setbacks intensely; they may not react outwardly, but are churning inside, she says.

In contrast to high-reactive people, low-reactive individuals don't have rapid, intense or enduring emotional responses to events. They tend to remain unperturbed through the ups and downs of life (or chillaxed, as the kids would say). "I'm probably in the chillaxed category," McAuley says.

Researchers evaluated 95 students who volunteered for the study at Waterloo University. The students were enrolled in psychology courses. Researchers had the volunteers do a series of tasks, like resequencing an auditory string of jumbled letters and numbers in the correct alpha-numeric order. Study participants rated their reactions to different events to gauge their respective moods. Researchers looked at the correlations between the volunteers' moods, emotional reactivity and executive functioning, as measured by how well they did on the tasks.

Though the study clearly showed that highly reactive people as a group performed better in carrying out executive function tasks, that doesn't mean that anyone, whether he or she is high-reactive or low-reactive, should endeavor to experience bad moods more often, McAuley says. "I don't think we want people to put themselves in a bad mood just to be more productive," she says. "A bad mood is a bad thing, especially over the long run." People who experience bad moods over a long period of time are more likely to [suffer from depression](#) and other chronic illnesses, McAuley says. Besides, putting yourself in a bad mood would probably be unpleasant. For example, not [getting enough sleep](#), [consuming an unhealthy diet](#) or [eating too much sugar](#) can contribute to a poor mood, but who wants to go through that? In short, it's not worth putting yourself in a bad mood to boost your executive function, she says.

Meanwhile, low-reactive people, who are less likely to experience bad moods, can employ an array of strategies to try to improve their focus and performance when they aren't feeling their best. Experts suggest these four strategies:

Remember that your mood and feelings are temporary. Remind yourself that [every single emotion you've experienced in your life](#), from joy to despondence, has been temporary, says Anita Gadhia-Smith, a psychotherapist who practices in the District of Columbia and suburban Maryland. Your mood isn't and never will be static. Whether it's good or bad in the moment, it will inevitably change. "If you're in a bad mood, try to

maximize your time and get things done, whether it's organizing a closet or making progress on a work project," she says. "Try to be grateful during both the good and bad moods."

When you don't feel like doing something, do it anyway. If you have a chore or work-related task that you just don't feel like doing, follow through on it anyway, says Michelle Maidenberg, a psychotherapist based in Westchester, New York. Taking positive action when you're in the dumps could improve your outlook, she says. "Just do it no matter what mood you're in," Maidenberg says. "Once you do, you'll feel a sense of accomplishment and mastery, and it will compel you to continue down that path. Taking action can help lead you from a bad mood to a better mood."

Don't let yourself be controlled by your feelings. As you go through your day, [rely on your head and intellect rather than your emotions](#), Gadhia-Smith says. "If you're in a bad mood and don't want to go to work, that's a problem," she says. "You can't live according to your feelings. You have to show up and stand the watch regardless of how you feel." That means keeping your priorities in order and doing what you have to do, like showing up to your job and putting in your best effort and keeping medical, professional and social appointments.

Remember that you're not unique. [Everybody experiences bad days or moments that test their resilience](#), so it's pointless to compare yourself to other people, Gadhia-Smith says. "Other people experience the same things on a regular basis, however great their lives may appear from the outside," she says. "What you see on the outside may not reflect what's on the inside. Keep in mind, you're not the only one who goes through adversity."