HOW TO CALM DOWN, CHEER’ UP!

O’s Guide to Soothing Your Mind

PLUS:

THE BAD-MOOD CURE

The Open-Focus Brain by Les Fehmi and Jim Robbins (Trumpeter Books); book feature and interview on page 318
WE ARE CREATURES of habit; we love a good routine because doing the same old same old doesn't take much mental effort. But getting stuck in certain ways of thinking can hinder our ability to both enjoy and respond effectively to new situations. Like a body, the mind needs regular stretching to stay agile and resilient.

People, by nature, are more or less receptive to new activities and ideas. "Open" types are typically imaginative, creative, intellectually curious, and hold unconventional beliefs compared with "closed" types, who tend to resist change. Although you don't have to have an "open" personality to be mentally healthy, experts say that anecdotally in cases where close-minded people are forced to become more flexible in their approach to the world—by a shattering event, for example—they report that life is richer and more fulfilling as a result. Fortunately, all it takes to keep your mind limber is...

**Insight:** We each have a book of rules in our head about how we "should" behave—"I've got to be perfect," "Never ask for help," "I always put others ahead of myself." Start trying to pinpoint the rules that drive you, and write them down (we're not saying this is easy, but once you start looking, you may be surprised at what you discover). For each, ask: "Does it serve me and enhance my life? or is it one I'm following because I'm afraid not to?" If the rule belongs to the latter category, question it. For example, if you "never ask friends for help," why not? Are you afraid that they might reject your request? Or that you'll end up feeling beholden to them? You could be right, so test the rule by asking a good friend for a small favor. You may find that your request is cheerfully granted, and that your friendship deepens rather than becomes tense as a result.

**Behavior:** If a night out usually means dinner and a movie, buy tickets for a flamenco performance instead. Drive the slow, scenic road to work versus the highway. Take a class in a subject that interests you but has nothing to do with your job. When you follow a routine, your brain can operate in low-energy mode, via relatively primitive structures known as the basal ganglia, says Jeffrey Schwartz, MD, coauthor of The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force. In contrast, new activities engage the prefrontal cortex, an evolutionarily younger area that needs more energy to function. That's why breaking a routine may feel hard—but if you push past that effort, Schwartz says, new experiences can help stimulate fresh states of mind that leave you feeling both more focused and energized.

**Emotion:** The next time you have a bad day, resist the urge to retreat to the TV or an extra glass of wine. Instead, let yourself sense any anger, disappointment, sadness, whatever is going on in you. Write the feelings down, talk about them to a friend, or simply sit with closed eyes and allow them to be (for a meditation exercise, see "5 ways to Break a Downward Spiral," page 317). According to personality researchers, the willingness to experience both positive and negative emotion is a sign of mental health.
and negative feelings is another factor that distinguishes extremely open people from closed ones; it’s also associated with increased longevity after heart problems, according to a recent study at Duke University. On the flip side, denying emotions is a well-known driver of addictions.

**FOCUS:** The way we pay attention to the world can make a huge difference in the way we experience it. “Many adults in our culture are addicted to a very narrowly focused attentional style in which we beam-in sequentially on the tasks of work, shopping, paying our bills, and so on,” says Les Fehmi, PhD, coauthor of *The Open-Focus Brain: Harnessing the Power of Attention to Heal Mind and Body.* This gripping form of attention, which can be identified by a characteristic brain wave pattern on an electroencephalogram (EEG), is the mode we typically use when poring over a written report or staring into a computer monitor at the office. It’s tiring to sustain (doing so often requires periodic infusions of caffeine and sugar), and is correlated with physiological reactions such as muscle tension, stress hormone secretion, and increased blood pressure, all of which take a toll on our health. This kind of attention can also wreak havoc on our relationships—what romantic partner wants to be scrutinized with the same intensity that we direct toward an important work assignment? Yet because we’re called on to use the narrow focus so much, it’s hard to let go of.

Only on vacation do many of us broaden our awareness to include the smell of pine trees, the crunch of pebbles underfoot, the way a color mutates in the rain—a mode of taking in the world that Fehmi calls open-focus attention. This mode is correlated with more synchronous EEG patterns (the famous alpha activity) and physiological relaxation. You can get a small sense of it by trying this exercise: Close your eyes and let your mind respond to the following series of questions, allowing about 15 seconds for each. There are no correct answers. Simply notice whatever sensations or feelings arise.

**Can you imagine...**

- the space between your eyes?
- the space inside your nose as you inhale and exhale naturally?
- the space occupied by your jaw?
- the space inside your throat, expanding until your entire neck is filled with space?
- the space inside your throat and neck expanding to fill the entire region of your shoulders?
- the space that your whole body occupies expanding out into the room?

Preliminary clinical research suggests that practicing exercises like this can reduce muscular tension, anxiety, and depression, and improve intellectual performance. —G.L.

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**7 Ways to Restart a Day**

**YOU’VE JUST WOKEN UP, AND YOU’RE ON THE WRONG SIDE OF the bed. Is there any way to switch to the other side? Absolutely.**

1. **As soon as the alarm rings:** Spend your first 15 seconds awake planning something nice to do for yourself today. “This can really set you up in a good mood—even if it’s just going by the farmers’ market and getting fresh strawberries,” says Alice Domar, PhD, whose next book—*Be Happy Without Being Perfect: How to Break Free from the Perfection Deception*—will be out in March.

2. **Get up.** The longer you lie there, the more you ruminate, the darker your outlook is likely to become, says Christine Padesky, PhD, coauthor of *Mind Over Mood.* So get vertical and make a cup of coffee, take a shower, feed the cat...

3. **...and drink**—make that two glasses of water upon awakening, the time when our bodies are dehydrated, says Susan M. Kleiner, PhD, author of *The Good Mood Diet.* Dehydration causes fatigue, which affects your mood.

4. **Move it.** You already know the number one way of chasing away a bad mood: exercise. A workout at the gym sure helps. But even just a few minutes of movement—a fast walk, for example—raises energy and reduces tension, says mood expert Robert Thayer, PhD, professor of psychology at California State University, Long Beach, and author of *Calm Energy.*

5. **Investigate.** When you’re dogged by anxiety or the dread you woke up with, try to pinpoint what’s causing it. Did someone say anything the day before? Do you have a meeting today you wish you didn’t? Was it the dream you were having when the alarm went off? “If you can figure out why you’re upset, that’s halfway to feeling better,” says Domar.

6. **Be kind and thankful.** This isn’t exactly news, but generosity and gratitude are both big contributors to happiness, according to Todd B. Kashdan, PhD, who directs the Laboratory for the Study of Social Anxiety, Character Strengths, and Related Phenomena at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. Do something nice for a stranger or friend and see if you don’t feel better about yourself. Also jot down three things that you’re grateful for. It seems so simple, but counting your blessings just has a way of making you remember the sun is shining.

7. **Laugh at yourself.** The best comedians point out the mundane aspects of life—relationship strife, a boring job, a closet full of too-tight clothes; they exaggerate those circumstances, and give us a perspective we can laugh about, says Mark Ridley, owner of the Comedy Castle in Royal Oak, Michigan. Look at your own life and try to appreciate the absurdity of what doesn’t go exactly according to plan (the diets, the men, the buzz cut). Acknowledging how little control we actually have over what happens is sometimes a most freeing gift to yourself. —Kathryn Matthews

For further resources, see page 378.