

# UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION

## Managing Your Emotions



### Student Counselling Services

- What are Emotions?
- What is Emotional Intelligence?
- Identifying Feelings
- Coping with Strong Emotion
- Effectively Managing Anger
- Effectively Managing Grief
- Managing Mood Shifts

## What Are Emotions?

Scientific interest in emotions underwent something of a renaissance in the 1990s, with anthropologists, neuroscientists, researchers into artificial intelligence and cognitive psychologists all contributing to the topic.

An emotion is a complex psychological event that involves a mixture of at least three reactions:

- **A physiological response:** such as a change in heart rate, muscles tension, blood pressure and respiration rate.
- **A subjective experience:** internal thoughts and feelings about the response. This includes what you tell yourself, and how you label the experience (e.g., “good” or “bad”).
- **An expressive reaction:** such as a distinctive facial expression or body posture. Because culture plays an important role here, this may include the learned or habitual reactions that you associate with the emotion.

Emotions or feelings are now considered to be a vital and healthy part of being human.

They are vital to survival. They motivate us and help us to adapt to a changing environment, prioritize, bond with others, and focus on finding solutions to problems.

### **The experience of emotions is subjective.**

Nobody truly knows how another person experiences an emotion. Some emotions are experienced as strong and others as a mild. What you tell yourself about an emotion is also an important part of how you experience it. Similarly, what others tell you, and how your culture handles and labels emotions is an important aspect of your overall experience.

### **People vary greatly in their overall general level of emotional reactivity.**

A person who is “less reactive” might generally be calm, easy going, and take a slow pace. A person who is “more reactive” may be excitable, have stronger reactions to experiences and go at a faster pace. Neither type is right or wrong. Each type has its positive and negative qualities. Becoming aware of your type can help you better understand your responses to stressful circumstances and how you typically interact with others.

# What is Emotional Intelligence?

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KNOWING WHAT YOUR EMOTIONS ARE AND HOW TO HANDLE THEM IS A VALUABLE SKILL THAT HAS BEEN CALLED EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE (EQ). IT INVOLVES KNOWING HOW TO DEAL WITH EMOTIONS IN EFFECTIVE AND ADAPTIVE WAYS (E.G., KNOWING WHEN TO EXPRESS AN EMOTION AND WHEN TO IGNORE OR DELAY ITS EXPRESSION).

People can learn to build their own emotional intelligence by attending to the following factors:

## 1. Awareness of your own emotions

Do you pay attention to how you feel? Can you give a name or label to your feelings? Can you identify them when you first begin experiencing them? What helps you in that identification process? For most people, it is helpful to spend some time thinking or talking about experiences to increase awareness of feelings.

## 2. Acceptance of your emotions

The ability to accept the existence of feelings is considered to be healthy. Acceptance does not mean that you like or that you will act upon a particular feeling. It simply means that you acknowledge that the feeling is there and let that be okay.

People often find it more challenging to accept certain emotions (e.g., anger, resentment, guilt, jealousy) than others (e.g., relief, joy). Acceptance of all emotions, however, frees people from the energy needed to deny their own experience. Fully accepting your emotions can be difficult, yet is also self-affirming and freeing.

## 3. Decision to act on or ignore your emotions:

Some feelings require more immediate action (e.g., feeling afraid while walking alone at night) while others are best acknowledged then ignored (e.g., frustration when another driver cuts you off in traffic). At other times, you may decide that taking some time to think about how you are feeling before you react is the wisest course of action (e.g., feeling upset about a poor performance appraisal at work). The ability to appropriately time the expression of strong emotions is generally considered important to mental health.

## 4. Communication and/or expression of your emotion to others

Expressing feelings appropriately is important to good physical and mental health. "Bottling things up," denying and avoiding feelings is not generally the best way to cope with emotions. On the other hand, "letting everything hang out" and expressing every emotion can also be unhealthy and unproductive. Finding an appropriate balance between these two extremes is key.

## 5. Being aware of other people's emotions:

Being in tune with other peoples' feelings is important. This includes accurately reading

- their body language
- gestures
- and verbal communication.

This skill assists people in creating satisfying relationships with others.

## Building your emotional intelligence

WILL HELP YOU TO OVERCOME DEPRESSION AND PREVENT FUTURE EPISODES.

# Identifying Feelings

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FEELINGS ARE A NATURAL PART OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE. THEY ARE NEITHER GOOD NOR BAD. THEY JUST ARE. HOW WE RESPOND TO FEELINGS, HOWEVER, CAN BE POSITIVE (E.G., THANKING SOMEONE WHEN WE FEEL GRATEFUL) OR PROBLEMATIC (E.G., THROWING AND BREAKING OBJECTS IN ANGER).

The first step to better managing feelings is to accurately identify them. Check the feelings you are able to easily identify.

- |                                    |                                     |                                      |                                   |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> joyful    | <input type="checkbox"/> confused   | <input type="checkbox"/> overwhelmed | <input type="checkbox"/> peaceful |
| <input type="checkbox"/> sad       | <input type="checkbox"/> guilty     | <input type="checkbox"/> happy       | <input type="checkbox"/> nervous  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> disgusted | <input type="checkbox"/> frustrated | <input type="checkbox"/> enraged     | <input type="checkbox"/> calm     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> lonely    | <input type="checkbox"/> loved      | <input type="checkbox"/> resentful   | <input type="checkbox"/> _____    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> exhausted | <input type="checkbox"/> depressed  | <input type="checkbox"/> humiliated  | <input type="checkbox"/> _____    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> grateful  | <input type="checkbox"/> jealous    | <input type="checkbox"/> relieved    | <input type="checkbox"/> _____    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> angry     | <input type="checkbox"/> ashamed    | <input type="checkbox"/> stressed    | <input type="checkbox"/> _____    |

## Ask yourself:

- Yes  No Have I learned to accept all of my feelings as a legitimate part of my experience (or do I categorize feelings as either “good” or “bad”)?
- Yes  No Would it be helpful to more often ask myself, “How am I feeling?”
- Yes  No Do I have a particular feeling that tends to show itself as another feeling (e.g., I look sad when inside I feel nervous, I sound angry when really I’m embarrassed)?

If I’m not sure about what feelings I’m having, would it be useful to ask some of the following?:

- “What just happened?”
- “What’s going to happen?”
- “How might someone else in this situation feel?”
- “What might be affecting me that’s not so obvious?”
- “Am I feeling stressed about something?”
- “Did something just happen to trigger a memory?”

- Yes  No Could I use some practice at better identifying my feelings?
- Yes  No Could I benefit from better managing my response (i.e. behavior) to some of my feelings?

# Becoming More Aware of Your Feelings

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It is now generally accepted that some emotions are universal and innate. While humans are capable of an enormous range of emotional experience, the six fundamental universal emotions are:

1. **happiness**
2. **sadness**
3. **surprise**
4. **fear**
5. **anger**
6. **disgust**

Sometimes an experienced emotion is actually secondary to a more primary, hidden or masked emotion. A good example of this is anger, which is often secondary to feeling shame or hurt. To deal with any emotion effectively, it is important to explore the primary emotion with situations that typically produce emotion.

## **How Can I Become More Aware Of My Emotions**

- Decide to pay more attention to your internal states and sensations.
- Become familiar with situations that typically produce emotion.
- Remember that emotions are often a signal that something needs to be attended to.
- Train yourself to come into the present, and to experience “the here and the now”.
- Practice applying labels to your feelings.
- Stay with the sensations and feelings you experience. Embrace them, become familiar with them, and name them.
- Talk with others. It is often in the very process of sharing with others that we become aware of, discover and identify our emotions.

## **How Can I Become More Aware of Other People’s Emotions?**

- Practice paying more attention to the reactions of others.
- If appropriate, ask others what they are feeling, and discuss this with them.
- Respect others if they do not wish to discuss their emotions.
- Become aware of your assumptions about what others are feeling.
- Check out your assumptions, and be prepared to abandon them and change them if needed.

Remember that an emotion is not a behaviour. Regardless of how you feel, it is always your responsibility to choose how you will react to your feelings.

# QUESTIONS ABOUT FEELINGS

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Am I usually aware of my feelings?

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Can I generally identify my feelings?

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What helps me to be better aware of my feelings?

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Is my awareness of my feelings in 'real time' or is it 'after-the-fact'?

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Am I able to distinguish between a feeling and a behaviour?

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How do I rate my ability to accept my feelings (even the uncomfortable ones)?

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How do I rate my ability to communicate/express my feelings?

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Would I benefit from being more or less expressive?

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Am I generally aware of other people's feelings?

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Have I fallen into the habit of complaining to others about my uncomfortable feelings?

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# An Exercise In Identifying Emotion

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## Jennifer and David Scenario

Read the following scenario. Use the questions on the following page to help increase your awareness of emotions and different ways they may be managed.

Jennifer and David are second year Arts and Science students. They have known each other since kindergarten. Their parents are best friends and the families often share summer vacation time together. Jennifer and David are also best friends. They both love sports and the outdoors. They have supported each other through many tough times, including the time when David was arrested for shoplifting. They share their secrets because they trust each other completely. Never have they considered compromising their friendship by developing a dating relationship with each other.

In September, Jennifer and a group of friends go to Louis'. Jennifer ends up winning two tickets to the first Huskies' basketball game of the season. She knows how much David loves basketball, and even though several of her other friends want to go, she chooses David.

A week before the game, Jennifer and David are sitting in the bowl. Steven walks up and says "Hi." The three of them talk for a few minutes and Steven starts to flirt with Jennifer. After he leaves, Jennifer grabs David's arm and says, "Oh, I would love to go out with him." David says, "You know, Jen, there is something I've been wanting to tell you about Steven." Jennifer looks excited and says, "What?! Tell me!" David, looking concerned, says, "When I was at Rachel's party last weekend, Steven was really drunk and I saw him go into the bedroom with Ashley's sister. Ashley's sister was really wasted and was crying when she came out of the bedroom." Jennifer looks confused. David, noticing Jennifer's confusion, says, "I just think you should be careful."

A day before the game, Jennifer runs into Steven and he asks, "What are you doing tomorrow night?" Jennifer gets a bit flustered and thinks to herself, "What am I going to do? David and I are going to the basketball game. But Steven's so hot and everyone wants to go out with him." Then she responds, "Umm, I won some tickets to the basketball game, so thought I'd go to that." Steven looks interested and says, "Mind if I tag along?" Jennifer hesitates and thinks, "It's just a basketball game. It's not really a date. Besides, David and I can go anytime." She says, "Sure." Steven says, "How 'bout I pick you up around 6:30?"

Jennifer knows David will have feelings about her choice to go to the game with Steven. But the more she thinks about it, the more she tells herself, "It's only a date. Why should David care? It's not like I'm going to sleep with him. Plus, David will understand. We can go to a game together anytime." Between classes, David and Jennifer pass each other in the tunnel. David calls over, "Hey Jen, can't wait for tomorrow night. I'll pick you up at 6:45." Jennifer looks uncomfortable and waves.

As Jennifer gets ready for the game, her mom comes into her room and says, "There was a message from David on the machine. He's at work and he'll meet you outside of the Education Building at 7:00. The door bell rings. Her mother answers the door and returns to say, "Jennifer, there is a young man at the door – I thought you were going out with David tonight. Jennifer says, "Never mind Mom, I've gotta go" and runs out to meet Steven.

At 7:10 David is still waiting outside the gym. He gets permission from the ticket attendant to go in and check if Jennifer is waiting inside. When he goes in and looks around, he sees Jennifer and Steven sitting in the stands together, laughing.

## Questions About The Jennifer and David Scenario

Using the list below, think about the feelings that Jennifer, David, Steven, Jennifer's mom and Ashley's sister might have experienced.

Trust	Annoyed	Betrayed
Love	Ashamed	Worthless
Caring	Anxious	Happy
Contentment	Dread	Proud
Excitement	Baffled	Self-confident
Loyalty	Disappointed	Entitled
Disgust	Worried	Jealousy
Violated	Embarrassed	Guilt
Scared	Angry	Resentful
Powerful	Hurt	_____

When thinking about the 'Jennifer and David Scenario', did you notice that you applied any "rules" about responding to emotion such as the following:

- Yes  No It's not ok to be angry.
- Yes  No It's not ok to show anger.
- Yes  No Get even.
- Yes  No Avoid uncomfortable feelings.
- Yes  No Act as if nothing happened.
- Yes  No Confront people immediately.
- Yes  No Discontinue contact without explanation.
- Yes  No \_\_\_\_\_
- Yes  No \_\_\_\_\_

Can you identify some ways that each person in this scenario could respond that could fuel depression?

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In what ways could each person respond that would help reduce the likelihood of depressed mood?

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# Coping With Strong Emotions

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It's easy to start reacting when we experience a strong feeling such as anger, guilt or embarrassment. Here are some tips to help you better manage when you find yourself overwhelmed with emotion.

## **Take time to calm down so you can think clearly**

- Count to ten
- Breathe
- Take time out if you need to. Do something physical (e.g., go for a walk)
- Engage in distraction (e.g., temporarily think of something else)
- Do something that is self-soothing (e.g., make a hot chocolate, step outside for some fresh air)
- Visualize yourself handling the situation successfully
- Talk to someone supportive
- Use supportive self-talk ("This is a difficult situation. I'll do my best to manage.")
- Think about how the other person/people may be feeling

## **Evaluate your alternatives.**

- What are some possible responses to your emotions and situation?
- What are the pros and cons of each response?
- How do you feel about each possible response?
- Remember that some causes of emotional distress don't have a simple remedy. On-going problem-solving and coping efforts may be in order.

## **Choose a response.**

- Decide when/where/how to enact your response
- Choose behaviors that are respectful of others
- Choose behaviors that demonstrate your respect for yourself
- Learn to communicate assertively

## **Be ready for next time.**

- Pay attention to what does and doesn't work when it comes to managing emotions
- Make a "Things To Do When I'm Feeling \_\_\_\_\_" list, so you've got options ready next time
- Continue to pay attention to your feelings and practice feeling them, talking about them and using them as a signal to problem-solve if necessary
- Seek professional help if you continue to struggle to manage strong feelings



# Effectively Managing Anger

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## What Is Anger?

Anger is a natural human emotion with an important purpose. Its usefulness is in its ability to empower people to respond to threats and injustice. Anger helps people recognize situations in which rules are being broken, behavior is inappropriate or a deliberate attack is occurring. As such, anger in and of itself is not a problem. Everyone becomes angry. How anger is managed, however, can be problematic.

Poorly managed anger contributes to depressed mood and numerous personal problems.

Outward signs of anger can include a raised voice, scowling, clenched jaw and/or fists, glaring and flushing. The physiological changes that accompany anger include increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure and muscle tension. Chronic anger has been shown to contribute to a variety of medical difficulties, including digestive and coronary problems (McKay, Rogers and McKay, 1989).

## When Is Anger A Problem?

Recognizing and addressing an anger problem is an important step in maintaining your health, enjoying satisfying relationships and promoting healthy self-esteem. Well-managed anger results in feelings of competency and maturity. The following may be signs of poorly managed anger:

- Violent behaviour (e.g., pushing, slapping, throwing/breaking objects); threats of violence
- Yelling; put-downs; ridiculing; frequent sarcasm; using anger to gain power and control
- Sudden explosions of anger; "raging"
- Intense and frequent feelings of resentment
- Seeking opportunities to "rebel"; looking for reasons to get angry
- Obsessing about having been mistreated
- Focusing on revenge or hate
- Over-reacting to minor transgressions
- Enjoying a "rush" when intensely angry
- Feeling out-of-control, childish or guilty for "exploding"
- Others express concern or fear in response to your anger
- Avoiding the expression of any anger; feeling guilty about, or afraid of, expressing anger
- Isolation; lost relationships, jobs or opportunities because of mismanaged anger
- Passive aggressiveness (covertly expressing anger. For example, being chronically late).

## What Causes Anger Problems?

Difficulties managing anger may stem from a history of numerous adverse life events (e.g., poverty, illness, loss), being violated (e.g. physically abused) or repeatedly observing anger being managed in inappropriate ways. For some people, unresolved feelings, such as grief or worthlessness, are expressed as anger. Further, cultural standards for appropriate masculine and feminine behavior can contribute to anger problems. Society often creates role expectations for men regarding power and control (e.g. that men must be physically and intellectually strong). Gender role socialization for women includes messages about being "nice", avoiding conflict and working to please others. These cultural standards can be a factor in mismanaged anger for some men (feeding aggressiveness) and women (promoting the denial and internalization of anger).

*McKay, M., Rogers, P. & McKay, J. (1989). When Anger Hurts: Quietening the storm within. Oakland: New Harbinger.*

# TIPS TO BETTER MANAGE ANGER

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1. Work to view anger as a legitimate emotion and a natural part of life and relationships. It provides you with important information. Denying anger means denying an aspect of who you are.
2. Ask yourself where your anger is coming from. Is it a legitimate response to a transgression, or is it a way to distance yourself, cover feelings of hurt, or a way to act powerful when you feel powerless?
3. Decide to be in charge of you. Stay focused on choosing angry responses with care.
4. Anger signals a problem. The goal is to address the problem, not simply hide or express the anger. Work to see anger as a temporary emotional state that can be relinquished once an issue is addressed.
5. Pay attention to how your thinking contributes to your anger. For example, blaming and catastrophizing will likely increase feelings of anger. Believing you are incapable of managing conflict contributes to suppressed anger and lingering resentment.
6. Learn to recognize your triggers. Do you over-react in situations that leave you feeling incompetent? Are you more likely to explode when stressed and over-tired? Do you swallow your anger when someone communicates in an aggressive manner?
7. Learn to recognize the signs that your anger is building (e.g., pacing, shortness of breath, dwelling on how you have been wronged).
8. As soon as you feel yourself becoming overly tense, begin to breathe deeply. Exercising, listening to relaxing music, allowing yourself to cry or simply resting can help you to feel calmer.
9. Before responding to a situation, assess whether you feel able to address the problem in a calm and respectful manner. Also, approach the other person when s/he is calm and has time to talk.
10. Develop a repertoire of healthy anger responses. This typically involves enhancing your communication, assertiveness, problem-solving and/or relaxation skills. During times of conflict, it is often helpful to sit down, breathe deeply, speak calmly, and avoid swearing or using sarcasm. Listen. Focus on what you can do versus how you believe you have been wronged.
11. Practise relaxation (e.g., yoga). Learn to recognize how different your body feels when it is relaxed.
12. Read about anger management. Below are some suggestions.
  - Taking Charge of Anger (2004) by W. Robert Nay
  - Getting Over Getting Mad (2001) by Judy Ford
  - The Anger Control Workbook (2000) by Matthew McKay
  - The Dance of Anger (1997) by Harriet Lerner
13. Seek professional assistance if your anger scares others, interferes with your relationships, or results in emotionally abusive (e.g., name-calling, threats) or physically abusive (e.g., throwing objects, punching, hitting, grabbing) behaviour.

# EFFECTIVELY MANAGING GRIEF

Significant losses, such as the death of someone close to you, the breakup up of a close relationship, or the loss of hopes and dreams, are some of life's most stressful occurrences. Grieving is an adaptive response to loss. It is not a weakness, but a process that requires time, patience, and work.

Grief is unique to each individual. Different people (even members of the same family) experience their grief in different ways.

Grief may be complicated by prior experiences of loss, traumatic events surrounding the loss (e.g. suicide), a history of difficult relationships, or other personal factors (e.g. lack of social support). It can be especially helpful to seek assistance when a grieving process is complicated by other factors or events.

## What Happens During The Grieving Process?

Many people experience some of these common, normal grief reactions:

THOUGHTS	FEELINGS	BEHAVIOURS	PHYSICAL SENSATIONS
disbelief	anger	crying	dry mouth
confusion	guilt	social withdrawal	chest pain
preoccupation	relief	sleep disturbance	lack of energy
thoughts of death and dying	anxiety	absent-mindedness	tightness in your throat
	sadness	appetite disturbance	weakness in your muscles
	yearning	restless over-activity	hollowness in your stomach
	loneliness	dreams of the deceased	
	numbness	avoiding going to classes	
	disinterest	treasuring reminders of the	
	emptiness	lost other	
	resentment		

Immediately following a significant loss, many individuals report experiencing a period of numbness or shock. This may occur whether the loss was anticipated (as in the case of a friend dying of a terminal illness), or was unexpected (as in the case of one partner suddenly announcing the dissolution of a relationship).

Following this period of shock, people may experience a time of intense emotional upheaval, during which the full impact of the loss may be experienced. Here, your emotions may be overwhelming or frightening. They may temporarily interfere with your academic, social, or family life. The severity and duration of a grief reaction will vary from person to person.

For most people, the intense emotional pain of grief gradually subsides. Eventually, energy is refocused on the future.

If your grief response does not gradually lessen in intensity or, over time, continues to interfere with your academic, social or occupational functioning, then you may be at risk for developing depressed mood.

**Seek assistance.**

# Tips To Better Manage Grief

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1. Work to identify and accept all of your feelings about the loss. This is a difficult, yet vital, part of the grieving process.
2. Give some form of expression to your feelings. For most people this means talking about the loss. Some individuals feel that this is counterproductive, as it often results in tearfulness or uncomfortable feelings. However, talking can help you to vent your pain, accept the finality of the loss and gradually move forward with life.
3. Be aware that you need not experience or express your grief in a manner similar to those around you. You are a unique individual with your own way of grieving.
4. Reassure yourself that it is normal for feelings to take an “up and down” course. Some people describe experiencing their emotions in “waves” or “bursts” over time. Some days will be better than others.
5. Take care of your physical health. Try to eat nutritious meals, get enough rest, and exercise moderately. Avoid excessive use of caffeine.
6. Seek assistance with drug and alcohol problems. You may feel that these substances help to numb your feelings of grief. However, any relief you might experience is temporary. Substance abuse can contribute to problems that interfere with the grieving process.
7. Accept support. Some individuals believe they need to be “strong” and independent. At a time of significant loss, this is an unrealistic expectation. Allow those around you to provide comfort and assistance during this difficult time.
8. Seek support. Give yourself permission to ask for the help you need.
9. Remember that your loss is not something you need to “get over”. Your life has been changed and will never be quite the same again. You are learning to “live with” the loss.
10. Try to be patient. The work of grieving requires time. Gradually, your pain will lessen. This may occur over the span of weeks, months, even years.
11. Remind yourself that healing doesn’t mean forgetting. Memories will remain.
12. Make a conscious decision to get through your grief. Simply allowing the passage of time will not release you from your pain. Time itself does not heal. How you use the time that passes dictates the course of grief.
13. Give yourself permission to enjoy life and to have fun. Continue to do the things you like to do. Many individuals feel that it is not appropriate or respectful to experience positive emotions during a time of significant loss. However, an important part of recovery involves experiencing all of your feelings, including hope and happiness.
14. Recall how you have coped with difficult circumstances in the past. Some of the coping strategies that you have used in the past may be helpful to you now.

# Managing Mood Shifts

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There is some evidence to suggest that individuals who have been depressed in the past are more susceptible to allowing a small shift in mood (e.g. natural, transient feelings of sadness) to cause a large shift toward negative thinking. This, in turn, further reduces mood.

**Those with a history of depression are more vulnerable to perceiving a small shift in mood as having greater negative meaning.**

To help prevent relapses, take the time to notice smaller shifts in mood and then step back and choose alternate ways of interpreting them. Choose self-statements consistent with the situation.

**Try completing the following:**

Today (yesterday, last week) I noticed a slight downward shift in my mood when

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I started feeling

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I began thinking

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Then I started feeling

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Was my thinking realistic and balanced or did I begin to catastrophize?

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What is the most helpful thing to say to myself when I begin noticing my mood shifting downward?

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What can I do to respond to the downward shift?

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