

Introduction

A few people will raise their eyebrows when they hear that I've written a book about improving bad moods. I've certainly had my share of moods over the years, and, if you're like most people, you've had yours as well.

It's normal to develop a negative mood in response to difficult situations, especially those we have no control over. It's not normal, however, to be in a pissy mood most of the time. Nor is it normal to feel anxious, spacey, down, or extremely moody much of the time. Over the last few years, I've learned how to maintain more stable and upbeat moods. I may still get angry if someone intentionally tries to hurt me, but I now let go of that negative mood fairly quickly instead of letting it consume me.

If you look at people around you, the reality is pretty obvious: more and more of them are prickly, irritable, abrasive, and angry or have other mood and behavior problems. It's not just your imagination. A 2005 survey found that people believe that rude behavior is far more common than it was twenty or thirty years ago. Drivers honk their horns to punish the mistakes of other drivers. Office workers impatiently start boarding an elevator before others get off. Many people seethe in frustration while waiting in line at banks or supermarkets.

Some of us inflict our mood swings on employees and family members, and others seem hell-bent on physical violence. In 2006, police reports from across the country noted a surge in murders resulting from dumb and petty arguments, such as disagreeing over a dress, using the wrong soap dish, giving another person a dirty look, looking at someone's girlfriend the wrong way, or accidentally bumping into someone. The Philadelphia police commissioner was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying, "It's arguments—stupid arguments over stupid things."

Being as self-centered as we often are, we invariably blame everyone else when other people don't act the way we want them to. The situation reminds me of George Carlin's joke about drivers: if someone is going too fast, we think he's a maniac, and if she's going too slow, she's retarded. We're the only ones who are normal and balanced, right?

Jokes aside, you or someone you know may be guilty of the behavior I described. If you see yourself in what I've written, the good news is that this book can help you to improve your moods and deal with the inevitable stresses of life.

Our Society's Increasingly Negative Mood

Over the last twenty years, our society's mood as a whole has grown much worse. Argumentativeness, meanness, and unwillingness to compromise now pervade politics—but they're not restricted to politics. Who among us commutes and does not regularly encounter some form of meanness or recklessness on the part of other drivers—or is not guilty of it himself?

As an example, in the late 1980s, I moved to Beaverton, Oregon, and was immediately struck by the courtesy of drivers. This changed during a boom in the local high-tech economy, when thousands of people relocated from California and brought with them their notorious driving habits. The politeness I had experienced vanished in a sea of aggressive SUVs and BMWs.

Although drivers in some cities, such as New York and Los Angeles, are known for their aggressive habits, the same patterns began to appear in small towns and cities throughout the country. Drivers' muttering under their breath morphed into shouts, obscene gestures, road rage, and

freeway shootings. The problem is not only with driving habits. There has been an epidemic of what I call “pissy mood syndrome.” All too many people are in an irritable mood much of the time.

How Many People Have Bad Moods?

Just how common are our bad moods? Recent articles in the *Archives of General Psychiatry*, published by the American Medical Association, have pointed out that at least one of every two people will experience a serious mood or mental health problem at some time in his or her life.

One of every two people is a pretty sobering number, but other statistics from the same study are just as unsettling. Almost one in every three people will suffer from at least one serious bout of anxiety, including panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, phobia, social anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. One in four people will have some sort of impulsive-control problem, such as explosive outbursts and defiant behavior. One in five people will suffer from serious depression or bipolar (manic-depressive) disorder. One in every eight people will abuse alcohol or drugs.

A separate study, also in the *Archives of General Psychiatry*, reported that slightly more than 9 percent of American adults currently have serious mood disorders, and another 11 percent have clear-cut anxiety disorders. These percentages add up to a frightening 42 million adults, equivalent to the combined populations of New York, Illinois, Oregon, Colorado, and Connecticut. Stuart C. Yudofsky, M.D., a psychiatry professor at the Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, has estimated that almost 15 percent of Americans have a personality disorder, which might include mood swings and instability, impulsiveness, or some sort of self-defeating or self-destructive behavior. Yudofsky has also estimated that another 15 to 30 percent of people have a family member, a friend, or a coworker with a serious personality disorder.

This high prevalence of mood and behavior disorders is disturbing enough, but the numbers may actually be even higher. If you have had one bout with a serious mood disorder, you are likely to have another. Furthermore, these studies reflect the number of people who have had problems serious enough to be flagged by doctors. If you're simply irritable,

impulsive, anxious, depressed, angry, or physically aggressive—but are never diagnosed by a doctor or arrested by the police—you and millions of other people go through life below the medical and legal radar.

What Causes Bad Moods?

Our bad moods result from a variety of factors. We feel stressed at work, at home, and while commuting, and we feel as though we must do more in less time. Often, our bosses, our customers, and people who are closest to us simply don't understand how much pressure we're under, what we're trying to juggle, how hard we push ourselves, and how close we are to being totally fatigued. When we feel stressed and tired, we're more likely to be pushed closer to the edge.

Yet our bad moods also result from eating bad, or unhealthy, foods. In one study, researchers found that 80 percent of people with mood disorders knew that the foods they ate affected how they felt. Sugary foods and alcohol contributed to mood problems, whereas fish, vegetables, and fruit were associated with better moods. The translation: bad foods set the stage for bad moods, while good foods led to good moods.

What could food possibly have to do with our moods? The answer might surprise you. Nutrients provide the biological building blocks for brain chemicals called *neurotransmitters*, which affect how we think and feel. You probably know that when you work too hard to eat on time, your mood and energy levels likely suffer. When you don't eat enough high-quality *neuronutrients*—literally, “brain nutrients”—your body cannot make adequate amounts of mood-enhancing neurotransmitters.

Quick Tip

What Is a Neuronutrient?

Neuronutrients are vitamins, minerals, and related nutrients that are needed to make neurotransmitters. Neurotransmitters, in turn, are the chemicals that control our moods.

The Nutrisocial Concept: Where Society and Eating Habits Intersect

The relationship between food and mood is far more complicated than the so-called Twinkie defense some lawyers have used in criminal trials.

(That is, “Junk foods made him do it.”) Your body needs vitamins, protein, and other nutrients to make the brain chemicals that help you think clearly, maintain a good mood, and act in socially acceptable ways. I use the term *neuronutrients* to describe these important components of food. In later chapters, I’ll explain how you can use specific neuronutrients as part of a broader plan to improve your mood and behavior.

It’s important, however, that I emphasize that nutrition is not the only factor affecting your moods.

The way you eat has been shaped by your society, your family’s eating habits, how stressed you are by work and your home life, and advertising. Basically, your eating habits did not develop in a vacuum. I refer to these cultural, psychological, and social influences as the *nutrisocial* factors that affect our eating habits. By understanding these nutrisocial factors—and some of them, like advertising, are very powerful—we can learn to ignore or resist them. I’ll describe some of these nutrisocial forces in chapter 2 and offer advice for dealing with them in chapter 7.

What’s Different about This Book

Over the last thirty years, numerous books have been written and published about food and mood. Most of these books have focused on using diets, vitamins, and herbs to treat depression. While depression is a common problem that can be addressed through safe alternative therapies, people suffer from many other mood and behavioral problems that make life difficult for them and the people in their lives. In *The Food-Mood Solution*, I tackle a variety of these more common mood problems, including

- Anger and hostile behavior
- Tension and anxiety
- Irritability and impatience
- Impulsive and distractible habits
- Fatigue and fuzzy thinking
- Stress and sleep problems
- Alcohol and drug abuse

This book is different from all the other food-mood books in another important way. In addition to providing practical nutrition advice to help improve your moods, I address many of the stresses that have set the stage for bad eating habits and, just as important, recommend specific ways for you to control the impact of these stresses on your life.

So, by the time you finish reading this book, how will you benefit? If you follow at least some of my advice, you will

- Deal more effectively with the inevitable stresses of life
- Have better and more stable moods
- Reduce your bad and down moods
- Be less irritable and impatient
- Gain more energy
- Sleep more soundly
- Be sharper mentally, with better concentration

Two-thirds of this book focuses on specific nutrition and lifestyle advice to help you think more clearly, have better moods, and develop the patience to treat other people fairly and reasonably, instead of taking your frustrations out on them. I recommend vitamins and other types of supplements, foods you should eat and those you should avoid, and lifestyle changes to help you slow down, unwind, and reprioritize. I firmly believe that my four-step program will foster both mental and physical health. It has worked for me and for many other people. I believe it will work for you.

Why I Wrote This Book

Although I originally trained to be a sociologist, with a strong emphasis on social and psychological behavior, I've spent more than thirty years writing about nutrition and health. I've long been fascinated by the interplay of society, behavior, eating habits, and health—including mental health. As I looked back at my own experiences, I realized that my moods and behavior were often close to the edge and occasionally erupted in anger.

As one example, when I was in my late forties, I was writing a book,

going through a messy divorce, and dealing with a turbulent romantic relationship. I often felt overwhelmed by the stress in my life, and I was extremely anxious. I had to check my e-mail regularly—almost compulsively, for a reassuring or threatening message—and I always had my cell phone handy.

A turning point came one afternoon as I sat with a friend by a gentle stream in a desert canyon. At first, I was anxious about not being able to check my e-mail that morning, and adding to my initial distress, my cell phone LCD read “No service.” But then I began to mellow. By the time I got home, I felt renewed as a human being. The experience reminded me how important it is to occasionally disconnect from the demands and pressures of life.

Meanwhile, as I looked at the world around me, I became dismayed by the increasing polarization in politics and religion. To me, these negative changes in the larger world reflect the increase in bad moods and behavior we experience in our personal encounters. The sociologist in me kicked in, and I started to think about how our national mood had deteriorated, along with our eating habits.

Over the years, I’ve been lucky to know and talk with many researchers and psychiatrists who have a keen understanding of how nutritional deficiencies or imbalances affect mood, perceptions, and behavior. I started to pay more attention to scientific and medical journal articles that explored the relationship between nutrition, biochemistry, mood, and behavior. At the same time, I was frustrated by advice in self-help and nutrition books that often discussed behavior or nutrition but not both. I saw that there was a need for a straightforward book that integrated practical nutrition and lifestyle tips to reduce stress and improve moods and behavior.

I can’t blame all of the world’s problems on bad eating habits. Our world has its share of political, economic, and religious strife, but we can certainly improve it in small ways that, with a little luck, will grow. These small acts start with us, with our eating habits and those of our families, and with learning how to achieve a personal sense of peace in a turbulent and moody world.

My message is really very simple: you can feel good. Armed with knowledge, you can succeed at anything.

