

The best way to fix a sad mood: Whatever you think works best

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What's the best way to improve a sad mood? It may be whatever skill you think you're best at, a new study suggests.

Think you're good at mindfulness techniques? Then that may work best for you. Or do you believe a more cognitive approach is your [strength](#)? Then use that.

Researchers found that people who were in a sad [mood](#) improved more quickly when they used a mood-improving method that they were told was their strongest skill. These participants improved more quickly than people asked to use a skill that they were told was a relative weakness.

"We found that it helps people to think they're working with their strengths rather than something they see as a weakness," said Samuel Murphy, lead author of the study and a doctoral student in psychology at The Ohio State University.

What may be most surprising about the study, though, is that participants were randomly told that they were best at one mood-enhancing skill or the other.

"Our results suggest that whether participants were good at the skill was not relevant. It was the belief that they were good at that skill that made it effective," said study co-author Daniel Strunk, professor of psychology and head of Ohio State's Depression Research Laboratory.

The study was published online recently in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*.

One reason for this finding's importance is that for many years, psychotherapists focused on trying to fix what was wrong with their clients. In recent years, it has become more common to focus on a client's strengths and use them to help deal with their problems, such as depression.

But researchers are still learning how focusing on strengths helps clients, Strunk said.

"How therapists frame the treatment for a client may play an important role in how well it works. Telling clients that you're going to be working

on their strengths may further enhance the effectiveness of their treatment," Strunk said.

The study involved 616 undergraduate students. The researchers briefly told participants about two therapy skills—cognitive and mindfulness—that they said may be useful in their everyday lives. Both are used by therapists to help clients with issues such as depression.

Cognitive skills were defined as identifying and re-evaluating negative thoughts and beliefs. Mindfulness skills were defined as awareness and acceptance of one's thoughts and feelings without trying to change them.

Participants were then given a hypothetical situation in which they could use those skills—feeling hurt by not being invited to a social event by a friend—and directed to practice both skills and complete some measures on how they used them.

Each participant was randomly told that one of the skills—cognitive or mindfulness—was their strongest skill or their weakest skill and they would be using that skill in the next part of the experiment—a "sad mood induction."

The researchers then made participants sad by having them vividly imagine someone they cared about dying while they listened to the sad song "Russia under the Mongolian Yoke," played at half speed to make it sound even sadder.

As expected, most people reported a significant decrease in mood immediately following the induction. Participants were then asked to respond to five mood assessments in the minutes after the sad mood induction.

All participants saw their mood gradually improve after the induction

was over. Results showed that whether they were asked to use cognitive or mindfulness skills didn't have a significant effect on mood recovery—but the framing of whether they were told it was their strongest or weakest skill did.

Participants who were told that the skill they would use was their strongest—regardless of whether it was cognitive or mindfulness—saw a bigger improvement in mood than participants who worked with a skill they were told was their weakest.

The study results can't say for sure why framing the intervention as a strength provided better results.

"It may be that if there is this initial encouragement early on that they are really good at one particular strategy, that may inspire greater confidence and persistence in using this skill, which leads to better results," Murphy said.

Or it may be the other way around.

"People may be discouraged if they're told a particular skill is their weakness and not try as hard or be as confident that it will work," Strunk said.

The researchers said the findings may be helpful to therapists who focus on building clients' strengths. "It is very easy to let clients know that you're building on their strengths, so if it enhances the benefit, that will be important to try," Murphy said.

Strunk added that the results could help anyone dealing with a problem like a sad mood.

"We only studied mindfulness and [cognitive skills](#) here, but there are a

variety of approaches to improving mental health," he said. "The ones that you think would work best for you probably will indeed work best."

The researchers are conducting related research on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy with new patients from Ohio at Ohio State's Depression Treatment and Research Clinic.

More information: Samuel T. Murphy et al, Framing an intervention as focused on one's strength: Does framing enhance therapeutic benefit?, *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1002/jclp.23302](https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.23302)

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