

It is Easter Sunday. I am going on vacation tomorrow. I am in a good mood. I am smiling a lot. So, what does this have to do with depression? Am I trying to make you more depressed by telling you that I am happy today? Not really. I was sitting at my desk doing a couple of last minute things before I leave, and it occurred to me that writing a blog was something I could do, but was not required. And as I contemplated the topic, my mind went to the brain function of memory: we store and retrieve memory in networks. We tap into those networks when something triggers that network to start firing. One memory cues up another memory. One smell of food cooking conjures up memory of when we ate that food as well as who was with us, where we were and what the occasion was. One mood triggers us to remember similar moods.

In a depressed brain, thoughts of sadness, disappointment, loss or failure simply put us into the network of other times we have had similar thoughts. And then memory networks out, in a sort of ripple effect, to more sadness, disappointment, loss or failure. A bad mood can trigger memory of other times we were in a bad mood. And we remember what caused the mood, how it felt, what we thought, and that just make us feel worse. Have you ever noticed how easy it is to remember all the times your significant other made you angry when you are already mad at that partner who might, most of the time, be someone you like? That's neural networking for you!

Today I do not have to work to get into a good mood. The cues all around me and within my thought process are sending me into networks of fond memories of holidays in my past. I am anticipating a good time on vacation so my memory network of other times when I felt relaxed and had fun are cheering me.

My message is just to consider whether you want to be at the mercy of a negative network that automatically starts firing or if you want to change your depressed state by deliberately choosing another, more uplifting network to enter. How do you do that? Even if you do not have enough mental energy to wrench yourself out of a bad mood all by yourself, you might try one of the following:

1. Ask someone to tell you about a good experience that the two of you shared. Discuss it with them. See if you remember other good times you had with that person and, if you are able to do so, reminisce a bit.
2. Start writing about a good time you had, no matter how faint the memory of it may be at this moment. See how many details you can recall and write about them as vividly as you can, describing each of your sensory experiences in that memory.
3. Whatever you are doing on the day you read this, ask yourself if there is one good thing you can notice about your day or ask someone you are with what their high point of the day is so far. Think about or talk about whether you also had a high point in the day. Avoid the depressed tendency to be sarcastic about this. If it was a crummy day for you, well, ok then. But think about the other person's high point. Ask yourself if there was a time when you had a similar high point.
4. Finally, avoid that deadly word, "But!" You take away the good feeling of the memory you are trying to focus on when you say, "Yes, that moment was good, *but* look at all the crummy moments I have had." When you are depressed, spoiling a good thought is easier than letting it stand and develop into another good thought.

You can make this work even better letting a good thought stand alone. For example, “I was so happy that day at the beach.” Period. Refrain from adding what spoiled the day: like you got so sunburned you could not sleep, or it was the only good weather on your whole vacation or that the dog ran away that day... You get the idea.

Strengthening the positive network works best when you stay in that place of joy or delight or amusement or pleasure just as long as you can. Memory networks are strengthened with repetition.(No wonder our depressed thoughts are so strong and tenacious!) Tell yourself this: it is as necessary for memory as it is for weight training to do repetitions. Lift up those good thoughts over and over with determination to make joy networks as strong as depressed ones. Is there any downside to that?