

# Why Moods Magnify Themselves

Apr 28, 2009 by Luc Reid (article edited from original)

A section of Steven Johnson's book *Mind Wide Open* throws some light on moods and why they can persist for a while even without anything going on outside us to influence them: it seems that our brains are set up so that when we're in a particular mood, we tend to access memories of other times we were in that same mood. The technical term for this is "mood congruity." Johnson says, "Your memory system tends to serve up recollections of past events that are themselves congruous with your current mood."

So for instance, if I'm feeling anxious about something, my mind will automatically come up with memories of things that have made me anxious in the past—the weird sound my car has been making lately, the comments about cholesterol the doctor made at my last physical, or that creepy eighth grader who used to ride the same bus as me when I was twelve. Of course these things tend to make me *more* anxious.

This is great if the mood I'm in suits me: if I'm happy about something, I'll tend to remember other happy times and not worry about things. (Although if I'm in a situation where I need to "come back down to earth" and deal with something pressing, happy may not be the ideal state of mind.)

If I'm in a mood I *don't* want to stay in, one way I can break the pattern is to make myself think about things that remind me of whatever mood I want to be in.

"Think happy thoughts" (or more precisely, "Remember things that made you happy before") may not be the most profound advice either of us has ever heard, but since it is an effective way to feel better, it's worth trying the next time you're in a mood that doesn't suit you.

**Takeaway:** If you want to change your mood, make a special effort to dredge up memories of times you were in a better one.