

Introducing CBT for Low Mood and Depression: Rules for Living (and how to break them)

This is the third in a series of podcasts introducing some of the big ideas from CBT and how they can help with low mood and depression. Before I begin – if you haven't listened to the previous two, I'd recommend pausing for now and doing that first, as they set the scene for what I'm going to talk about here. Assuming you have, you may remember me introducing the concept of Rules for Living. In this podcast, we're going to dive deeper into this, looking at ways to pinpoint your own Rules and to break free of the ones that are getting in the way of feeling and functioning better.

We can think of Rules for Living as implicit guiding principles, expectations we have for ourselves. Typically they're not all that transparent to us; instead, they're embodied in our decisions, thought processes and self-perceptions. As with all rules, they have a directive to them: they tell us what we should and shouldn't do. Rules for Living develop as a result of our prior experiences, including what has been communicated to us or modelled within the family and at school, what brought us attention and affection, or the reverse; what brought us criticism or hostility, what helped us cope in difficult circumstances.

The theory is that we develop Rules for Living as a way of navigating life's challenges, protecting us from the myriad pitfalls it may have in store. As long as we stick to our rules – we're safe. Let's think about how that might work in the context of day-to-day life as a student.

Here in Oxford, I see a lot of students who find themselves either consumed by work, struggling to close the book – literally and mentally – or else doing everything they can to avoid it. In both cases, what's often behind this is some Rule for Living along the lines of "My work should be perfect" or "I must never let my standards slip". We all have lots of rules for how to behave in friendships and relationships too. Perhaps you're someone who is always thinking of others, always does their utmost to be helpful, even to the point of neglecting their own needs. In this example, we might imagine some variant of the rule: "I must please people all the time". Or what about someone who tends to back away from intimacy, pushes away those who want to help. Their rule might be something like: "I must be self-sufficient, I mustn't get too close to or dependent on others".

Now, it's important to note that there's much that's positive in these rules: high academic standards have no doubt got you where you are now, and are something you cherish and want to maintain. Similarly, there is a kernel of kindness and generosity in the people-pleaser, and there are things to be said for nurturing a capacity for independence. But these sorts of rules also have a problematic side to them. What we also need to attend to here is the unwritten threat attached to these rules – the "or else". I must never let my standards slip – or else I'm a failure. I must please people all the time – or else I'll be rejected. I must be self-sufficient – or else I'll lose control, or get hurt. Beneath these Rules for Living is a lurking fear. As in these examples, fears relating to approval, acceptance and control are particularly common. These are big, universal, fears, which we all do our best to manage in our own ways. But our personal histories and the social contexts in which we live can make us particularly sensitized to certain fears. If you've known what it is to feel out of control, it becomes vital to develop strategies to maintain a sense of control. If you've been made to feel inadequate, you'll find ways to prove that you're good enough. In the second podcast I mention the CBT concept of "Core Beliefs": our deep, dark fears about ourselves and the world around us. Rules for Living are ways of defending against our core beliefs, protective strategies if you like. The problem is, often they maintain pretty relentlessly exacting standards for us. Psychologist Margaret

Rutherford Robinson coined the term “Perfectly Hidden Depression” to describe ways in which perfectionism, underpinned by very rigid rules for living, can become a trap, leaving you constantly trying to dodge the inner critic and struggling to express or connect with your true feelings. Inevitably, too, there will be times when you can’t maintain your standards, when you find yourself breaking your own rules. And it’s at these times that we’re most vulnerable to low mood and, sometimes, depression. What happens then is that these background rules and beliefs start to skew your thinking, leading you to selectively attend to things that seem to confirm your negative ideas about yourself, and filter out evidence to the contrary. Someone who sets themselves relentlessly high academic standards, for example, and has fears about their competence and adequacy, might find it difficult to really trust their strengths and achievements: “Oh I only did well in my collections because it was stuff I’d learned already at A-level; it must have been a total fluke I got into Oxford at all”.

So – that’s the theory bit. In the remainder of this podcast I’m going to suggest some ways of using these ideas to improve your mood and resilience.

Step 1: Identify your Rules

This is easier said than done. Your rules have been a kind of backdrop to your life for many years, they feel as familiar and normal to you as old shoes. Here are some questions to ask yourself: are there particular themes to your negative thoughts, worries that really preoccupy you, triggers that really bring you down? Are there things you seem to respond to in a disproportionate way compared to others? Noticing when you’re more prone to worrying or beating yourself up can give you clues as to your rules for yourself, and the fears underpinning them. Other question to ask yourself: what’s my relationship with work? How do I navigate intimacy? What do I secretly long for? What messages did I receive growing up (implicitly or explicitly) – from family, peers, the society in which I lived? Accompanying this podcast is a list of some common student Rules for Living: looking at this might help you to reflect on which feel relevant to you. It’s a good idea to actually have a go at writing down what you think your Rules for Living might be: spend some time on this and try to really find the words that accurately capture your own feelings and experience.

Step 2: Think about where your rules came from

Once you’ve pinpointed a rule or two, it’s often worth giving some thought to where they might have come from. What are the “rules” within your family? Within the society and culture within which you grew up? If you have had experiences that stand out as especially traumatic for you, it’s possible these experiences may have been encoded as Rules for Living. Thinking about this can help you to understand why your rules make sense – or made sense at one time. If you grew up in an environment where praise and attention were conditional on doing well, it’s understandable you might develop high expectations for yourself. If you had experiences of rejection or alienation at school, that might help to explain why you feel you must work so hard to keep friendships intact. Understanding that there are good reasons why you think the way you do can help to avoid falling into self-blame, and is an important step in cultivating a capacity for self-compassion.

Step 3: Weigh up the pros and cons

Many of our rules serve us well, and would be ones we're quite happy to hang onto. As I mentioned above, even the more problematic ones often have a positive element to them. Loosening ourselves from their grip can also feel pretty risky. If working at 100mph has meant you've always excelled academically, what might happen if you took your foot off the pedal? If you've not allowed yourself to try new things for fear of failure, what would it be like to risk it? One useful technique is to – quite literally – weigh up the pros and cons of your rule: in what ways does it serve you well? In what ways does it limit you? Going to university brings with it a whole set of new experiences, opportunities and challenges. In new territory we can often resort to the familiar, falling back on rules that have worked for us in the past. But perhaps some of your rules need updating?

Step 4: Experiment with change

This is the hard bit. You've pinpointed a rule, you're convinced it needs updating – but it's not just as simple as creating a new one, is it? After all, these rules have been laid down over the years, they're etched into your neural networks. At this point, I really want to stress that all of this: identifying rules for living, weighing it up, experimenting with change – is difficult stuff, and takes time and lots of practice. Often, it's a process people go through with the help of a counsellor – and I'll remind you that option is available to you here in Oxford. If you'd like to experiment on your own, have a go at re-writing your rule, ask yourself what a more flexible, compassionate version might look like. Not "I must never let my standards slip" but "I try to aim high but a perfect track record is impossible – mistakes are inevitable and part of learning". Not "I must always put other people first" but "It's important to me to be attuned to other people's feelings and needs, but in order to do this sustainably I need to nourish and nurture myself". The alternatives are usually longer and more complex – and for good reason: life is more complex than they would have us believe.

Once you've got an alternative in mind, try experimenting with your new rule in ways that feel manageable: allow yourself to clock off work a little earlier one day; see what happens if you don't over-prepare for your tutorial or don't check through your essay; allow yourself to risk making a mistake. Invite yourself to open up a bit more with a friend you trust. Take a moment to congratulate yourself on an achievement; treat yourself. These are all examples of course; you'll find your own mini experiments. Thinking of them as experiments is often quite a good way of going about things: there will be part of you that resists the change, that doesn't want to break the rules. Ask yourself what this part of you is predicting will happen, and then compare it with what happens in actuality. Making changes to habitual behaviours is often one of the most powerful ways of challenging your un-tested assumptions. After all, if you're always playing by the rules, you never get a chance to find out whether you really need them, and what life might be like without them. One thing that can be helpful here is to remind yourself of your values, and the importance of a balance in which we can get in touch with our multiple needs, roles and identities. Think of this not as saying "no" to your rule, but as saying "yes" to something else that's important to you.

Don't forget: this is a process, your rules won't change overnight, and it's not your fault when they hook you in – as they will, again and again. I like to picture a well-trodden path through a wood: it's the obvious way to go, isn't it? Striking out on a new path feels weird underfoot, treacherous at times, and even once you've made it through, the way back isn't at all clear. But the more you walk that new path, the clearer it becomes. The old one is still there, and you will go down it sometimes – of course you will – but you have created another option for yourself.

That brings us to the end of this third podcast. As ever, to find out more, head to our website where you can find lots of good CBT resources and recommendations. For those who particularly struggle with perfectionism in the context of low mood, I've popped a couple of references at the end of the transcript. I wish you well as you engage with this tool and others to take control of your mood and feel better. Thanks for listening.

Further Resources

Overcoming Perfectionism (book) by Roz Shafran, Sarah Egan and Tracey Wade

Perfectly Hidden Depression (book) by Margaret Rutherford Robinson. See also her [website](#).

[CCI Workbook on Perfectionism](#)

[CCI Workbook on Low Self Esteem](#) (module 7 deals with Rules for Living)

Some examples of 'Rules for Living'

Note – this is not an exhaustive list, and the nuances of your own “rules for living” may differ; think of these as prompts to get you thinking, along with the questions in the podcast...

- I must always use my time productively in order to succeed/be thought well of
- I must always help everyone who needs it in order to be a good person
- I mustn't let my standards slip – or else I'll have failed
- If I make a mistake then people will think badly of me
- I must do something well in order for it to be worthwhile doing it
- If I don't try then I can't fail
- I must always optimise my experiences in order to succeed/grow
- If I don't try new things, I will stay safe
- If I keep a tight rein on my feelings then I'll stay in control

- If I don't let myself get too close to people, I won't be hurt (or lose my independence)
- If I please other people all the time then I might not be rejected
- I mustn't trust other people, or else I'll be hurt
- If I don't let anyone get to know what I'm really like, then people might think I'm ok
- If I do and say everything "right" no-one will think badly of me