

Using Behavioral Activation to Overcome Depression

Objective

To engage in behavioral activation to reduce symptoms of depression.

What to Know

When you are depressed, you may become less active, and the less active you are, the fewer opportunities for positive and rewarding things to happen to you. The fewer positive things you experience, the lower your mood. Behavioral Activation (BA) is one way out of this unhealthy cycle.

Behavioral Activation is an evidence-based treatment for depression that focuses on engagement in activities aligned with personal values and interests to increase positive reinforcement from the environment. Depression is maintained by a cycle of avoidance, withdrawal, and inactivity, leading to a decrease in rewarding experiences and an increase in depressive symptoms. BA breaks this cycle through a process that gradually increases your contact with pleasurable and rewarding activities.

Research indicates there is a close relationship between activity levels and mood. When you feel good, you spend time with people whose company you enjoy, do activities that make you feel good, and take on challenging tasks and adventures. This activity has positive feedback effects, including:

- feeling pleasure
- the opportunity to grow and learn
- a sense of mastery
- feeling connected and valued

If you are depressed, you probably tend to do less, so you have fewer opportunities to feel pleasure, mastery, and connection.

One way to break the cycle of depression is to increase your activity level – even if you do not want to. This process involves making life meaningful and pleasurable again through the following steps.

1. Learn about the cycle of inactivity --> depression --> inactivity and understand you must activate yourself to feel better.
2. Monitor daily activities to understand the relationship between your activity and mood.
3. Identify your values.
4. Schedule and do meaningful activities to increase experiences of pleasure and mastery.
5. Problem-solve obstacles to activation.

What to Do

Monitor Activity Levels and Mood. You can keep a diary or use the chart to track your daily activities and rate your mood. Record what you do each waking hour every day for a week.

Record everything you do – even unimportant activities. Rate your mood for each time slot on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 representing feeling very depressed and 10 representing feeling great.

Day of the week: _____

| Time | Activities | Rating |
|-------------|-------------------|---------------|
| 5:00 | | |
| 5:30 | | |
| 6:00 | | |
| 6:30 | | |
| 7:00 | | |
| 7:30 | | |
| 8:00 | | |
| 8:30 | | |
| 9:00 | | |
| 9:30 | | |
| 10:00 | | |
| 10:30 | | |
| 11:00 | | |
| 11:30 | | |
| Noon | | |
| 12:30 | | |
| 1:00 | | |
| 1:30 | | |
| 2:00 | | |
| 2:30 | | |
| 3:00 | | |
| 3:30 | | |
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| 8:00 | | |
| 8:30 | | |
| 9:00 | | |
| 9:30 | | |
| 10:00 | | |
| 10:30 | | |
| 11:00 | | |

Copy this chart for each day of the week, or use a journal, notebook, or diary.

Once you have monitored your activity for a week, look for patterns between your activity and your mood. Review your completed charts and ask yourself the following questions.

What activities were associated with your best mood? What were you doing?

What activities were associated with your lowest mood? What were you doing when your mood was lowest?

What do you notice about the relationship between your mood and how active you were?

Were there days when you did not leave the house? What was your mood like on those days?

What was your mood like on the days when you were most active?

Now, make a list of activities that helped you feel good, and which made you feel less good.

| Activities that made me feel good | Activities that made me feel bad |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| | |

Identify Values. Your values reflect what you find meaningful in life, what you care about, and what you consider important. Everyone's values are different, and they can change over time. Values reflect how you want to engage with the world, the people around you, and yourself.

There might be values you think are important and others that do not matter as much to you.

Think about your values. Which values are important to you? How successfully are you living your life in accordance with your values? Use the chart below as a guide. Rate the values in the left-hand column from 0 to 10, with 0 representing the value means nothing to you and 10 representing the value is extremely important to you. In the third column, rate how successfully you have lived your life in accordance with this value in the past month, with 0 representing not at all, to 10 representing completely.

Schedule Activities. Next, schedule activities for the upcoming week. Start with activities with low-difficulty ratings and write them on the following chart. Write down when you will do the activity, where you will do it, and with whom. After you complete the activity, describe how it went for you. Finally, rate your mood on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 representing feeling very depressed and 10 representing feeling very good. Note: Initially, the focus might be on relatively easy or short activities to ensure success, gradually building up to more challenging or longer activities.

| Activity | When will you do it? | Where will you do it? | With whom? | Outcome | Mood rating (0-10) |
|----------|----------------------|-----------------------|------------|---------|--------------------|
| | | | | | |
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What are some barriers or obstacles to engagement in the above activities? Be specific!

What can you do to overcome these barriers? Who can help you?

Can you think of a way of treating yourself if you complete half of your planned activities? What would be a good reward if you completed all of them?

Reflections on This Exercise

Did anything surprise you about this activity? If so, describe.

What will help you continue to engage in rewarding activities?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
