

Guide

US English

Using Behavioral Activation To Overcome Depression



The relationship between what we do and how we feel

Psychologists have found that there is a close relationship between our activity and our mood. When we are feeling good, we take part in activities that make us feel good, tackle new tasks or adventures that challenge us as individuals, and spend time with people whose company we enjoy. All of this activity has positive feedback effects:

- Doing activities we enjoy gives us feelings of pleasure.
- Challenging ourselves means that we have a chance to grow and develop, and gives us a sense of achievement.
- Having positive relationships with other people makes us feel connected and valued.

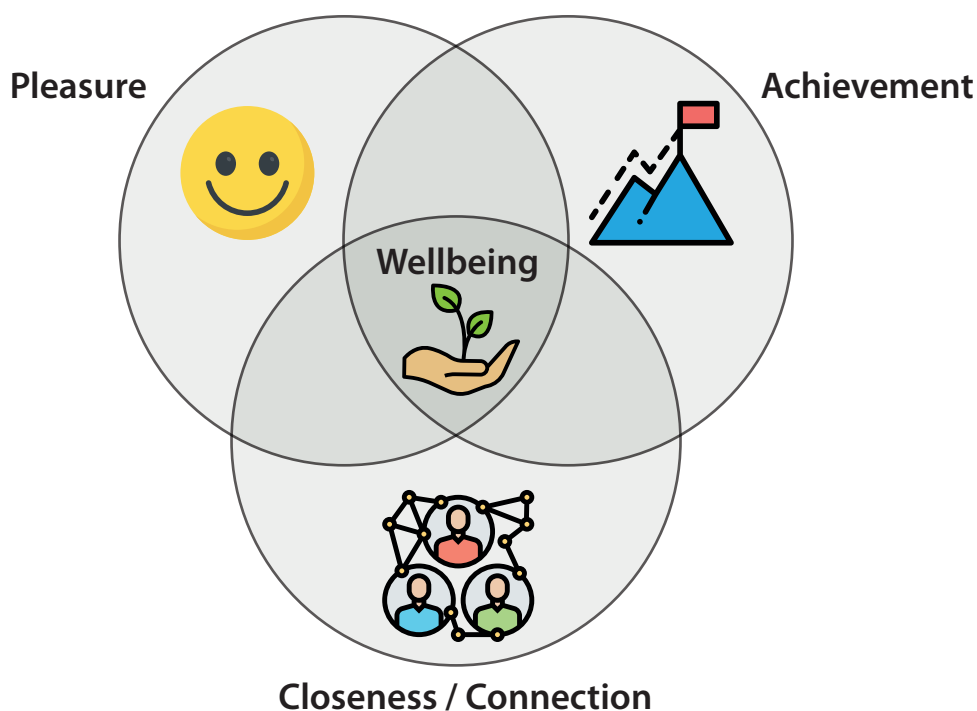


Figure: Wellbeing is the result of pleasure, achievement, and closeness.

The reverse is true too. People who are depressed tend to do less and so they have fewer opportunities to feel pleasure, achievement, and connection – the things we need to feel

good [1,2,3]. It is easy to fall into a trap:

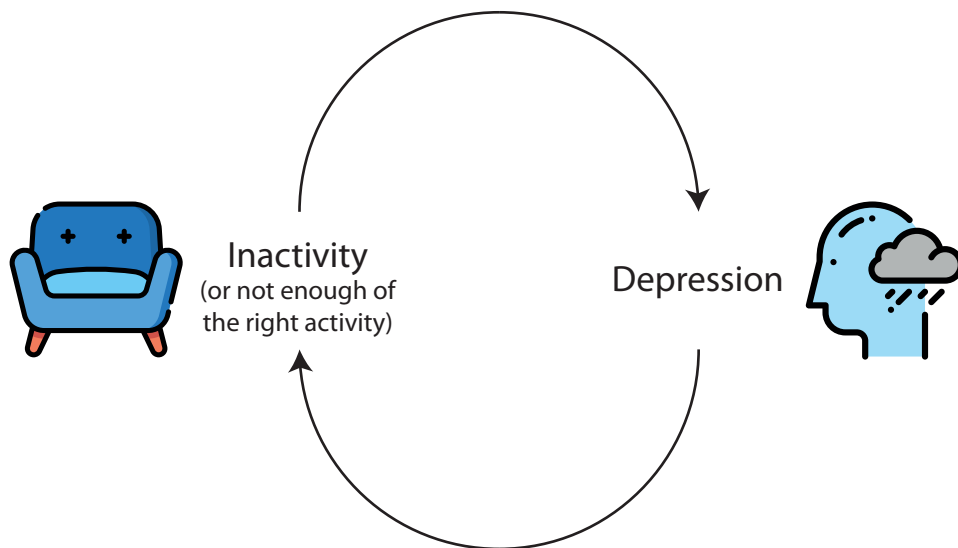
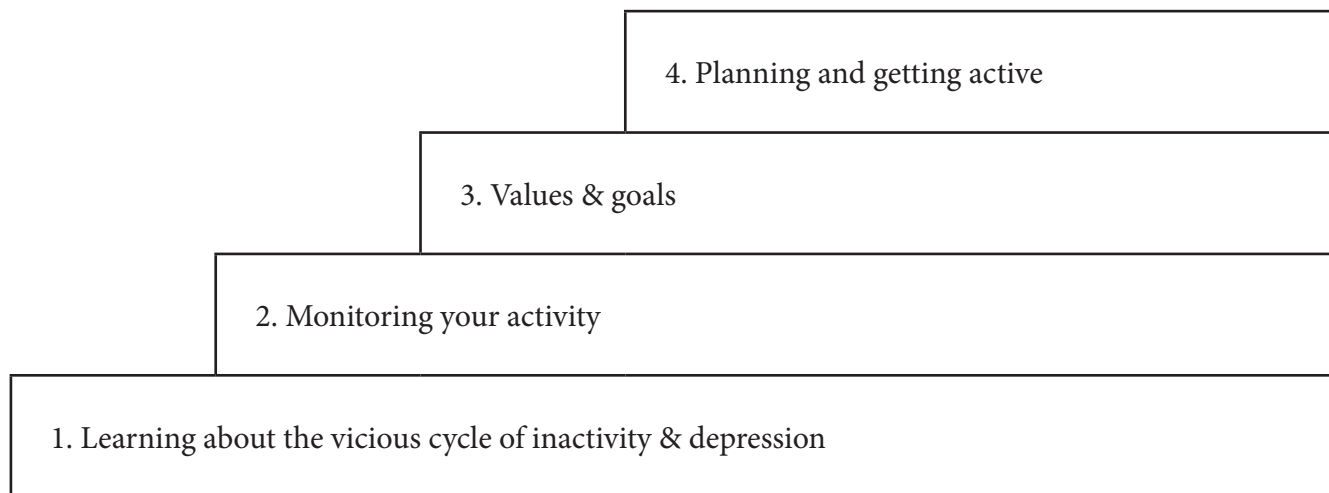


Figure: The vicious cycle of depression. Not enough of the right activity feeds depression.

Behavioral Activation (BA) is about making your life meaningful and pleasurable again, it involves these steps:



The next sections of this guide will walk you through these steps and help you to overcome your depression. Although this is a self-help guide, many people find that they get the most from BA when they complete it with the assistance of somebody else. It can be difficult to get started on your own and it can be helpful to have someone else checking in. This might be a professional who has experience of using BA, or a supportive friend.

The vicious cycle of depression is a problem of falling into habits of inactivity (or the wrong kinds of activity) which make you feel worse. When you are depressed you become less active, and the cycle repeats.

The slow way out of this trap is to wait until your depression just goes away (it does for some people). There are two big problems with this slow approach though: it can leave you feeling helpless because you are at the mercy of something out of your control to feel better, and you are likely to be waiting for a long time because the average episode of depression can last between three and eight months ^[4]. That's a long time to feel depressed!

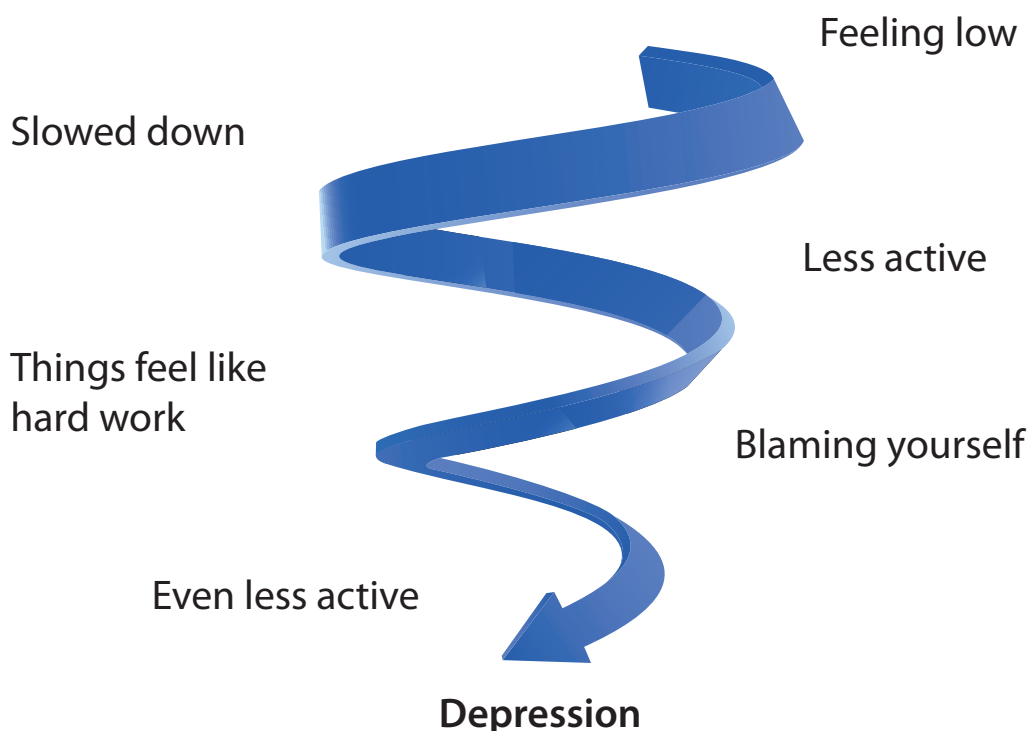


Figure: The vicious cycle of depression.

Often when you're depressed you don't feel like doing anything. The problem is that depression makes your motivation work in reverse. Normally you wait until you feel motivated then you do some kind of activity and feel good. But when you are depressed you lack motivation – it fails to come automatically – and you need to get active **before** the feeling of motivation comes along.



Figure: Motivation works in reverse when you are depressed.

The quicker way out of the vicious cycle of depression is to increase your level of activity **even if you don't feel like it to begin with**. This approach is called Behavioral Activation and it is a psychological treatment for depression with lots of scientific research proving that it works ^[5,6,7]. Now that you know about the vicious cycle of depression, the next step in BA is to monitor your activity and mood. This will help you to understand the link between how you spend your time, and how you feel. This is called **Activity Monitoring**.

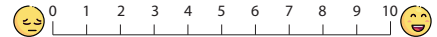
Activity monitoring

Use an activity diary worksheet to record what you do every day for a week, even for activities that might seem trivial or unimportant. We need to find out how your mood changes as you do different activities, so rate your mood for each time slot on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 representing feeling very depressed and 10 representing feeling very good.

Using Behavioral Activation To Overcome Depression

Activity Diary

Record what you did during each time period, then rate how you felt on a scale of 0 to 10.



| | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Morning • Who were you with? • What were you doing? • When did this happen? • Where did this happen? | Bus to work 3/10 work 3/10 | walk to work 6/10 work 3/10 | sleeping 7/10 Dozing in bed 4/10 | Sleeping 6/10 Called in sick to work and stay in bed 4/10 | Bus to work 1/10 meeting with my boss 1/10 | Sleeping 6/10 went for a run 7/10 | Stayed in bed 1/10 |
| Afternoon • Who were you with? • What were you doing? • When did this happen? • Where did this happen? | coffee with a colleague at work 6/10 work 3/10 | work 3/10 work 5/10 | video games 6/10 video games 4/10 | TV 4/10 TV 4/10 | work 2/10 work 3/10 | TV 6/10 Getting ready 3/10 | Stayed in bed 1/10 |
| Evening • Who were you with? • What were you doing? • When did this happen? • Where did this happen? | TV 4/10 TV 2/10 | TV 5/10 TV 2/10 | TV 4/10 Chores - washing, cleaning 5/10 | TV 1/10 TV 0/10 | TV 5/10 TV 1/10 | met a friend for dinner 6/10 | Stayed in bed 1/10 |

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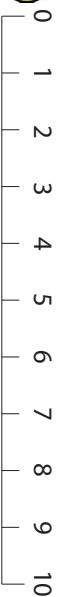
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Record what you do for the next week on a copy of the Activity Diary

Activity Diary

Record what you did during each time period, then rate how you felt on a scale of 0 to 10.



| | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|----------|--------|
| Morning  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who were you with? • What were you doing? • When did this happen? • Where did this happen? | | | | | | | |
| Afternoon  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who were you with? • What were you doing? • When did this happen? • Where did this happen? | | | | | | | |
| Evening  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who were you with? • What were you doing? • When did this happen? • Where did this happen? | | | | | | | |



Top tips for activity monitoring

- Carry the form with you, or leave it somewhere obvious as a way to remind you. Good places are beside your bed, or stuck to the front of the fridge.
- As soon as possible after each event write down what you did and how you felt. It is more difficult to remember how you felt a day later.
- Record an activity on the form even if it seems trivial or unimportant.
- Record the information on your smartphone if that is easier for you.

Reviewing your activity diary

Now that you have monitored your activity for a week it is time to look for patterns between your activity and your mood. Look at your completed activity diary and ask yourself the questions below. Make some notes as you go:

What activities were associated with your highest mood? (i.e. what were you doing when your mood was highest?)



What activities were associated with your lowest mood? (i.e. what were you doing when your mood was lowest?)



What kind of activities make you feel most connected to other people?



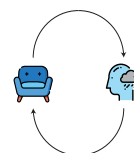
What kind of activities gave you the biggest sense of achievement?



What kind of activities gave you the biggest feelings of pleasure?



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

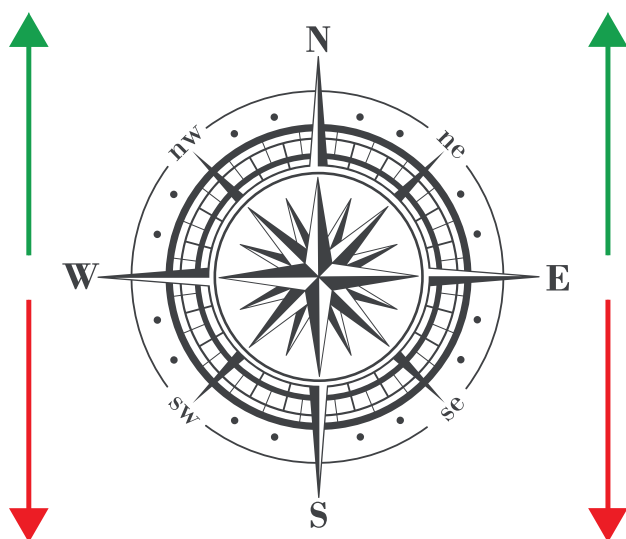


Step 3: Getting in touch with your values

Our values reflect what we find meaningful in life. They are what you care about – deep down – and what you consider to be important. Everybody’s values are different and they can change over time. They reflect who you want to be and what you want to stand for. Psychologists think that a happy life is one where you are in touch with your values: where you are doing at least some of the things that you hold to be important. When you feel depressed you often lose touch with what is important to you, so it can be helpful to reconnect. It is worth exploring your values when you do behavioral activation so that you can make sure that at least some of your activity is consistent with your values.

One way of thinking about values is that they are like compass directions that we want to move in. You never reach a value, but it guides the direction of your journey. Let’s say that ‘North’ represented a value that was important to you. You can never *reach* North but it is the direction you are headed in. Goals are more like the destinations along the way: you might go to a new town, or have to cross a stream or climb a mountain to keep traveling North.

Things that move you towards your value



Things that move you away from your value

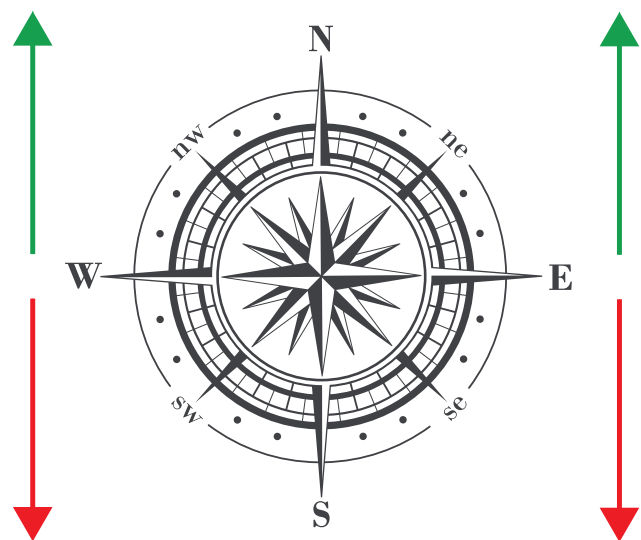
Value: Heading North

- Facing North
- Travelling North
- Preparing for my journey North
- Stopping and getting side-tracked
- Hanging out with people who are heading South

Figure: If you have a value of ‘Heading North’ there are always things that will help you to move towards or away from that value.

Now let's imagine a real example. Imagine that you value 'being a caring person'. You might set some goals to help you move in that direction. For example you might decide to set aside some time each day to really play with your children and to give them your full and undivided attention, or make time to do something nice for a friend.

Things that move you towards your value



Things that move you away from your value

Value: Being a caring person

- Asking my friend how they're doing.
- Spending time with my children and giving them my full attention.
- Putting less pressure on myself and planning a treat for myself.
- Not responding to messages from my family and friends.
- Criticizing myself for not being good enough.

Figure: If you value 'Being a caring person' there are always ways that you can move towards your value.

Getting in touch with your values (part 1)

The exercise on the next page will help you to think about your values. Let yourself dream and consider all of the things that are of value to you. The areas described are valued by some people. Some might be values you think are important, and others that don't matter so much to you. Don't worry too much about whether they are possible, let yourself connect with what your heart really desires. There are no 'right' answers.



On the next page, circle five or ten values that are important to you.

Getting in touch with your values

| | | | | | |
|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Being accepting of myself and others | Leading an exciting life | Being attractive | Being powerful & authoritative | Being self-sufficient | Appreciating beauty in the world |
| Being a caring person | Challenging myself | Being open to new experiences | Living a comfortable life | Behaving honorably | Keeping my promises |
| Caring for others | Making a difference | Being a force for good | Collaborating with others | Being considerate | 'Flow' and being in the moment |
| Creating beautiful objects | Being reliable and trustworthy | Being in nature | Being environmentally conscious | Being loyal and true | Being admired |
| Being famous | Ensuring my loved ones are safe and secure | Being physically active | Living a healthy life | Choices and freedom | Being forgiving |
| Being spontaneous | Living in the present moment | Having close and authentic friendships | Having fun | Being playful | Being generous |
| Being genuine and authentic | Learning and growing | Growing as a person | Living a spiritual life | Respecting my faith & beliefs | Helping others |
| Being hospitable to guests and strangers | Living with integrity | Being hopeful and optimistic | Being humble and modest | Finding the humor in life | Being hard-working |
| Sharing my innermost experiences | Fighting injustice and promoting justice | Being informed and knowledgeable | Discovering and sharing knowledge | Making time to relax and enjoy | Being loved |
| Being a loving person | Mastering skills | Living with moderation (avoiding excess) | Being loving with my partner | Thinking for myself | Helping others to do well |
| Being open to new ideas and opinions | Living an organized and orderly life | Being passionate | Experiencing physical pleasure | Being popular and well-liked | Being powerful and in control |
| Living a life of purpose | Being rational and logical | Being a realist | Making responsible decisions | Being a risk-taker | Being romantic |
| Being safe from danger | Accepting myself | Being disciplined and in control | Understanding and knowing myself | Living a life of service & duty | Experiencing sexual pleasure |
| Living a simple life | Having time for myself | Being close to God | Being stable and settled | Respecting other cultures and traditions | Preserving my cultural traditions |
| Living a moral life | Being wealthy | Promoting peace in the world | Teaching and sharing knowledge | Being curious | Fixing things |

Getting in touch with your values (part 2)

Now, choose one of the values that you have circled as important and think about things that you could do in your life that would move you towards or away from this value.

Value: _____

Things that could move you towards your value

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Things that could move you away from your value

Step 4: Planning & getting active

Behavioral activation says that it is important to increase your level of activity **even if you don't feel like it to begin with**. Remember that by starting to do the things that are important to you will start to feel better. With BA we bypass the sticky problem of motivation by planning your activity and sticking to the plan.

Part 1: Getting activity ideas

Now it is time to choose some activities that you're going to do. Good places to get ideas for your plan include:

- **From your activity monitoring:** Which activities were best at improving your mood?
- **From your values assessment:** What mattered to you the most? What activities could you do that would move you towards your values?
- **Be sure to include the essentials** like washing and brushing your teeth every day, doing laundry every week, cooking meals, shopping for food, and to include some activities that are social.
- **Use an activity menu:** You could choose some ideas from the activity menu on the next page. Maybe think about which ones are in line with your values.



Top tips for choosing what to start with

Sometimes people find it difficult knowing which activities to start with. Here are some tips to help you to make decisions:

- Start small. To begin with choose activities that are easily achievable.
- Try to create a daily routine.
- Try to involve other people to support you (and to increase your sense of accountability).
- Don't let 'perfect' be the enemy of 'good enough'. It's more important to get started than it is to have the 'right' activities.

Activities Menu



Animals

- Pet an animal
- Walk a dog
- Ride a horse
- Volunteer at an animal shelter
- Go bird watching
- Go fishing
- Listen to the birds
- Visit the zoo



Be active

- Go for a walk
- Go for a run
- Go for a swim
- Go hiking
- Go cycling
- Go to the gym
- Go bowling
- Go ice / roller skating
- Play golf / football / tennis
- Throw a frisbee
- Fly a kite
- Try a martial art



Clean

- Clean the house
- Clean the yard
- Clean the bathroom
- Clean the toilet
- Clean your bedroom
- Clean the fridge
- Clean the oven
- Clean your shoes
- Do the washing up
- Fill / empty the dishwasher
- Do laundry
- Do some chores
- Organise your workspace
- Clean a cupboard



Connect with people

- Contact a friend
- Invite a friend over
- Send a message to a friend
- Write a letter to a friend
- Reconnect with an old friend
- Be with friends
- Meet a friend for coffee
- Make new friends
- Join a new group
- Join a new group
- Join a political party
- Join a book group
- Join an exercise class
- Join a mother & baby group
- Join a dating website
- Ask someone out
- Go on a date
- Go 'people watching'



Cook

- Cook a meal for yourself
- Cook a meal for someone else
- Bake a cake / cookies
- Roast marshmallows
- Have a BBQ
- Find a new recipe
- Organise a dinner party



Create

- Draw a picture
- Paint a portrait
- Take a photograph
- Doodle / sketch
- Organise photographs
- Make a photograph album
- Start a scrapbook
- Finish a project
- Do some sewing / knitting



Expression

- Laugh
- Cry
- Sing
- Shout
- Scream



Kindness

- Help a friend / neighbour / stranger
- Volunteer at a charity
- Make a gift for someone
- Try a random act of kindness
- Do someone a favour
- Offer to babysit
- Teach somebody a skill
- Do something nice for someone
- Plan a surprise for someone
- Make a list of your good points
- Make a list of things or people you are grateful for



Learn

- Learn something new
- Learn a new skill
- Learn a new fact
- Enrol in a class
- Go back to school
- Watch a tutorial video



Mend

- Repair something in the house
- Repair your bike / car / scooter
- Make something new
- Change a lightbulb
- Decorate a room



Mind

- Daydream
- Meditate
- Pray
- Reflect
- Think
- Try relaxation exercises
- Practise yoga



Music

- Listen to music you like
- Find some new music to listen to
- Go to a concert
- Turn on the radio
- Make some music
- Sing a song
- Play an instrument
- Listen to a podcast



Nature

- Try some gardening
- Plant something
- Do some pruning
- Mow the lawn
- Pick flowers
- Buy flowers
- Go for a walk in nature
- Swim in the sea
- Hike in the mountains
- Sit in the sun



Plan

- Set a goal
- Create a budget
- Make a 5 year plan
- Make a 'to do' list
- Make a 'bucket list'



Read

- Read a favorite book
- Read a new book
- Read the newspaper
- Read your favorite website



Schedule

- Get up extra early
- Stay up late
- Sleep in late
- Book a day off
- Tick something off your 'to do' list



Self care

- Take a bath
- Take a shower
- Wash your hair
- Give yourself a facial
- Trim your nails
- Go for a massage
- Sit in the sun
- Take a nap



Shop

- Shop for groceries
- Shop for clothes
- Go to a car boot sale / yard sale
- Take things to a charity shop



Travel

- Go for a ride in the car
- Take the bus somewhere
- Catch a train
- Plan a holiday



Try something new

- Try a new food
- Take a walk in a new place
- Listen to some new music
- Watch a new TV show or movie
- Wear some new clothes
- Read a new book
- Try a new class
- Do something spontaneous
- Express yourself



Watch

- Go to the cinema
- Watch a movie
- Watch a TV show
- Watch a YouTube video



Write




- Write a letter of complaint
- Write a letter with compliments
- Write a letter to your politician
- Write an angry letter
- Write a grateful letter
- Write a 'thank you' card
- Write a journal / diary
- Write your CV
- Start writing a book

Part 2: Scheduling activities

Scheduling activities (planning in advance where, when & how you will do them) makes it much more likely that you will carry them out. Now it is time to schedule some activities for the next week. Use the activity planning diary and write down the activities that you will do. It is helpful to think about:

- What the activity is.
- Where & when you will do it.
- Who you might do the activity with.
- Any obstacles and how you might overcome them.

Activity Planning Diary Record what you **will do** during each time period.

| | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Morning  • What will you do? • Where will you do it? • Who will you do it with? | Get up at 8am Eat breakfast Walk to work | Get up at 8am Eat breakfast Bus to work | Get up at 8am Eat breakfast Walk to work | Get up at 8am Eat breakfast Bus to work | Get up at 8am Eat breakfast Walk to work | Lie in until 9am but no later Call my mum for a catch-up | Get up at 8am Exercise |
| Afternoon  • What will you do? • Where will you do it? • Who will you do it with? | Have lunch with a friend | Take a walk at lunch | Lunch with a friend | Take a walk at lunch | Have lunch with a friend | Go and visit the museum Have lunch out | Take a trip to the city |
| Evening  • What will you do? • Where will you do it? • Who will you do it with? | Go to the cinema to watch a film with a friend Early bedtime 10pm | Exercise - gym or swim | Choose an episode to watch on TV after doing chores | Treat self to a bath and read a book Call Dad | Zumba class 'Life admin' Nice meal | Research some clubs to join | Take a trip to the city |

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Figure: An *Activity Diary* with a week of activities planned. You will find blank copies at the back of this guide.



Have a go at doing your plan and remember that even if you don't feel like it, motivation will follow.






Tips for getting the most out of behavioral activation

- **Don't start too hard.** Life is a marathon, not a sprint. Your new level of activity has to be more than your 'depression level' but it also has to be realistically achievable.
- **Break activities down into smaller steps.** Let's say you had identified a value of becoming independent, but were living with your parents and weren't qualified to drive. Some helpful steps towards your value of living independently might be making an online application for a driving license, or doing some budgeting to work out how soon you might be able to move into your own place.
- **Reward yourself.** Deliberately acknowledge when you have completed something, and don't just rush on to the next activity. Some people find it helpful to 'check off' activities that have completed as an acknowledgment that they have done it. Can you think of a way of treating yourself if you complete half of your planned activities? What would a fair reward be if you completed all of them?
- **Remind yourself why you're doing this.** Thoughts like "I'll do it when I feel better" are sneaky and can creep back in. Remind yourself often that it's important to get active even if you don't feel like it and that behavioral activation is one of the most effective treatments for depression. Remind yourself that motivation works in reverse in depression – that you will have to get active before the feeling of motivation comes.
- **Don't expect to feel better straight away.** It may take some time before you start to feel pleasure or a sense of achievement again. The important thing is to stick with it and the good feelings will return.
- **Recruit friends and family to support your efforts.** If they know what you are doing, and why, they may be able to help you. You could even give them a copy of this guide.

Activity Planning Diary

Record what you **will do** during each time period.

| | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|----------|--------|
| Morning  <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What will you do?• Where will you do it?• Who will you do it with? | | | | | | | |
| Afternoon  <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What will you do?• Where will you do it?• Who will you do it with? | | | | | | | |
| Evening  <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What will you do?• Where will you do it?• Who will you do it with? | | | | | | | |

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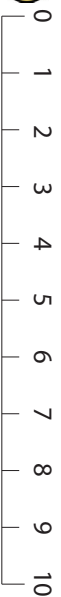
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Activity Diary




Record what you did during each time period, then rate how you felt on a scale of 0 to 10.



| | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|----------|--------|
| Morning  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who were you with? • What were you doing? • When did this happen? • Where did this happen? | | | | | | | |
| Afternoon  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who were you with? • What were you doing? • When did this happen? • Where did this happen? | | | | | | | |
| Evening  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who were you with? • What were you doing? • When did this happen? • Where did this happen? | | | | | | | |

Activity Planning Diary

Record what you **will do** during each time period.

| | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|----------|--------|
| Morning  <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What will you do?• Where will you do it?• Who will you do it with? | | | | | | | |
| Afternoon  <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What will you do?• Where will you do it?• Who will you do it with? | | | | | | | |
| Evening  <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What will you do?• Where will you do it?• Who will you do it with? | | | | | | | |

Value: _____

Things that could move you towards your value

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Things that could move you away from your value

Value: _____

Things that could move you towards your value

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Things that could move you away from your value