

**Coping**

Intervention



n/a



Client



Yes



Behavioral Activation

Behavioral activation is an effective technique used to decrease depressive symptoms (for a review, see [4]) through encouraging people to deliberately engage in activities associated with the experience of pleasure or mastery. In other words, this technique involves people planning and engaging in positive events, thereby gaining more control over positive events. The rationale behind behavioral activation stems from research showing a significant relationship between mood and the number of pleasant activities [1,2,3].

Author

This tool was created by Dr. Lucinda Poole and Dr. Hugo Alberts.

Goal

This tool aims to help people with depression or lowered mood become more physically active through activity scheduling and mood monitoring.

Advice

- During activity planning (Step 4), advise clients to schedule activities on days (and times) that would be feasible for them to complete them. Activity planning is all about being realistic and reasonable so that the client has the greatest chance of success.
- Starting behavioral activation can be challenging because we work against our brain's attempt to protect us by withdrawing and slowing down. Advise clients that extra effort and some discomfort often occur initially, but they will reap the benefits in the long run.
- Encourage clients to move at a manageable pace, one small step at a time. Trying to move too quickly can lead to failure and disappointment, which can be overwhelming and discouraging.
- Encourage clients to engage in their chosen activities mindfully, that is, with presence and openness to what they are doing and how they are feeling, refocusing their attention on the activity if/when it wanders off.

- Practitioners should reward clients for their achievements, big or small. People who are depressed and self-critical tend to disregard the “kudos” they deserve when they achieve something. Practitioners should model these “kudos” by offering them to clients often in session and encouraging them to do the same outside of the session. One way for clients to do this is to give themselves a treat, like ice cream or a hot bath, when they complete an activity.
- Remind clients not to be discouraged if they cannot complete all their scheduled activities. Encourage them to continue moving forward with the activity anyway, even if it is not going as they had hoped.
- A brief troubleshooting guide is included in Appendix D.



References

1. Lewinsohn, P. M., & Graf, M. (1973). Pleasant activities and depression. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 41, 261-268.
2. Lewinsohn, P. M., & Libet, J. (1972). Pleasant events, activity schedules, and depressions. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 79, 291-295.
3. Gallagher, D. (1981). Behavioral group therapy with elderly depressives: An experimental study. In D. Upper & S. Ross (Eds.), *Behavioral group therapy* (pp. 187-224). Champaign: Research Press.
4. Cuijpers, P., Van Straten, A., & Warmerdam, L. (2007). Behavioral activation treatments of depression: A meta-analysis. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 27, 318-326.



Behavioral Activation

Introduction

When we feel down or depressed, we tend to become less active. Low energy makes the idea of doing things largely unappealing. Unfortunately, this inactivity means that we have less opportunity to experience pleasurable events and activities, feel the release of endorphins (the “feel-good” hormone), and engage with others, all of which are natural mood boosters.

Getting active does not always need to involve structured *exercise*, which is not often at the top of the list as something fun to do. Physical activity can be gardening, going for a bike ride with a friend, doing housework, or cooking. It is about using your arms and legs to do something fun or productive. In the therapy world, this type of physical activity is known as *Behavioral Activation*.

Behavioral Activation is based on the widely held view that depression often prevents us from doing the things that bring enjoyment and meaning to our lives. Such a “downward spiral” leaves us feeling even worse. The idea behind Behavioral Activation is to reverse this cycle by getting active.

In this exercise, we will come up with some ways for you to become more active, and we will measure how you feel before and after these activities to see whether they help boost your mood.

Step 1: Log your current activity levels

Activity monitoring is the first step of Behavioral Activation. Keeping track of what you do throughout the day helps see how your daily activities influence your mood. For example, after logging your activities, you might notice that your mood is better after seeing friends and worse after binge-watching Netflix.

You will keep track of your activities throughout the day for one week. As you do this, please rate your mood after each activity. The mood is rated between 0-10, with “0” indicating “very low mood” and “10” indicating “very good mood.”

Use your My Activity Logbook (Appendix A) to record your findings.

A completed example is shown below:

Activity #	Time	Description	Mood
Activity #1	8:00-8:15	Morning stretch session	8/10



Step 2: Categorize your activities as either Energy Giving or Energy Draining

Based on your mood ratings in your Activity Logbook, determine which activities energized you and improved your mood (“energy-giving activities”) and which activities depleted you and made you feel worse (“energy-draining activities”). You might say that mood ratings of 4 and below were energy-draining, and mood ratings of 5 and above were energy giving.

Table 1. Energy Giving vs. Energy Draining Activities

Energy Giving Activities	Energy Draining Activities
■	■
■	■
■	■
■	■
■	■
■	■
■	■
■	■
■	■
■	■
■	■

Step 3: Determine whether energy-giving activities are pleasure or mastery

Of the energy-giving activities that you have listed in the previous step (Column 1), please think about whether you do each of them for “pleasure” or for “mastery.”

Pleasure activities are activities that we enjoy simply for the activity itself. We experience feelings of joy, lightness, and playfulness when engaging in pleasurable activities. Examples of pleasure activities include hobbies, spending time in nature, seeing friends, and playing games.



Mastery activities are activities that involve the development of skills. When engaging in mastery activities, we experience feelings of accomplishment and a sense of mastery over our environment. Examples of mastery activities include volunteering, practicing music, completing housework/chores, and playing sports. Mastery activities bring about positive feelings, such as pride and satisfaction.

Looking at your list of energy-giving activities in Table 1, consider “pleasure” and “mastery” activities. In Table 2, write all pleasure activities into column 1 and all mastery activities into column 2.

Table 2. Pleasure and mastery activities

Pleasure activities	Mastery activities
■	■
■	■
■	■
■	■
■	■
■	■
■	■
■	■
■	■
■	■
■	■

Step 4: Add to your list

One of the aims of Behavioral Activation is to add more pleasure and mastery activities into your day. Therefore, before we start scheduling your pleasure and mastery activities (Step 5), take a moment now to think about whether there are any other activities that you would like to add to either your list of pleasure or mastery activities in Table 1. The more, the better! You might like to read our list of 185 possible activities in Appendix B for inspiration.



Step 5: Plan your activities

Now it is time to start planning! From your activities listed in Table 1, choose 2 to 4 most feasible activities for your first week of Behavioral Activation. You may increase your number of planned activities over time, for example, 5 planned activities next week. You have many weeks ahead of you to complete all your listed activities, and limiting your commitment to just a few activities in Week 1 will help to set you up for success!

Using your Activity Planner (Appendix C), find time for each of your chosen activities during the next week and write down their specific details for completion. For example, you might schedule your “gardening” activity for Tuesday afternoon because you have no other commitments that day and the weather forecast looks clear.

After each activity, rate your mood on a scale from 1 (very low mood) to 10 (very good mood). In your Activity Planner, write down your mood ratings.

A completed example is shown below:

Activity	What?	When?	Where?	Done?	Mood
Activity #1	Gardening	2 PM	Home		8/10

Activity Planning Tips:

- Start with 2 to 4 of the most feasible activities.
- Schedule activities on the day and time you think you could easily and reasonably complete.
- Consider whether there are any barriers to completing an activity. For example, one barrier to the “cycling” activity might be that you do not own a bike helmet. You might need to first complete the “purchase helmet” activity before cycling.
- If you cannot do an activity on the day or time that you first planned, cross it out, write the activity that you did that time, and try to reschedule your planned activity.
- Remember not to get discouraged if your planned activity does not go as well as you had hoped. Try to continue to move forward with the activity anyway, doing the best you can.

Step 6: Reflection

After the week, take some time to reflect on the following:

- Did you manage to complete some or all your planned activities?
- Did your planned activities affect your mood? If so, how?
- How do you feel about yourself after this week?
- Have you learned anything about yourself during the last week?
- What can you get out of this exercise?



Appendix A: My Activity Logbook

Monday	Activity #	Time	Description	Mood
	Activity #1			/10
	Activity #2			/10
	Activity #3			/10
	Activity #4			/10
	Activity #5			/10
	Activity #6			/10
	Activity #7			/10
	Activity #8			/10
	Activity #9			/10
	Activity #10			/10



Tuesday

Activity #	Time	Description	Mood
Activity #1			/10
Activity #2			/10
Activity #3			/10
Activity #4			/10
Activity #5			/10
Activity #6			/10
Activity #7			/10
Activity #8			/10
Activity #9			/10
Activity #10			/10



Wednesday

Activity #	Time	Description	Mood
Activity #1			/10
Activity #2			/10
Activity #3			/10
Activity #4			/10
Activity #5			/10
Activity #6			/10
Activity #7			/10
Activity #8			/10
Activity #9			/10
Activity #10			/10



Thursday

Activity #	Time	Description	Mood
Activity #1			/10
Activity #2			/10
Activity #3			/10
Activity #4			/10
Activity #5			/10
Activity #6			/10
Activity #7			/10
Activity #8			/10
Activity #9			/10
Activity #10			/10



Friday

Activity #	Time	Description	Mood
Activity #1			/10
Activity #2			/10
Activity #3			/10
Activity #4			/10
Activity #5			/10
Activity #6			/10
Activity #7			/10
Activity #8			/10
Activity #9			/10
Activity #10			/10



Saturday

Activity #	Time	Description	Mood
Activity #1			/10
Activity #2			/10
Activity #3			/10
Activity #4			/10
Activity #5			/10
Activity #6			/10
Activity #7			/10
Activity #8			/10
Activity #9			/10
Activity #10			/10



Sunday

Activity #	Time	Description	Mood
Activity #1			/10
Activity #2			/10
Activity #3			/10
Activity #4			/10
Activity #5			/10
Activity #6			/10
Activity #7			/10
Activity #8			/10
Activity #9			/10
Activity #10			/10

Appendix B: List of Behavioral Activation Activities

Here are some examples of activities that tend to increase pleasure and mastery. You might think of more that are not listed. Circle the ones that you think could lead to enjoyment or mastery for you.

1. Soaking in the bathtub
2. Planning my career
3. Collecting things (coins, shells, etc.)
4. Going for a vacation
5. Recycling old items
6. Relaxing
7. Going on a date
8. Going to a movie
9. Jogging
10. Listening to music
11. Walking
12. Reminiscing on past parties
13. Buying household gadgets
14. Lying in the sun
15. Planning a career change
16. Laughing
17. Looking at photos of my past holidays
18. Listening to others
19. Reading (books, magazines, or newspapers)
20. Hobbies (stamp collecting, model building, etc.)
21. Spending an evening with good friends
22. Planning my daily activities
23. Meeting new people
24. Viewing beautiful scenery
25. Saving money
26. Spending time in nature
27. Going to the gym
28. Cooking
29. Paying bills
30. Practicing yoga
31. Walking my dog
32. Thinking about retirement
33. Repairing things around the house
34. Working on my car or bicycle
35. Remembering the words and deeds of loving people
36. Watching a movie
37. Having a quiet evening
38. Taking care of my plants
39. Buying, selling stocks and shares
40. Going swimming
41. Painting
42. Exercising
43. Collecting old things
44. Going to a party
45. Online shopping (in moderation)
46. Playing golf
47. Playing soccer
48. Flying kites
49. Having discussions with friends
50. Having family get-togethers
51. Riding a motorbike
52. Being intimate
53. Horse riding
54. Going camping
55. Singing around the house
56. Arranging flowers
57. Going to church, praying (practicing the religion)
58. Circuit training
59. Going to the beach
61. Doing nothing for a day
62. Attending class reunions
63. Going ice skating, roller skating/blading
64. Going sailing



65. Travelling abroad, interstate, or within the state
66. Sketching/doodling
67. Blowing bubbles
68. Doing embroidery/cross stitching/knitting
69. Sleeping in
70. Driving
71. Entertaining
72. Going to clubs (garden, sewing, etc.)
73. Wedding planning
74. Going bird watching
75. Singing with groups
76. Going on a date
77. Playing musical instruments
78. Doing arts and crafts
79. Making a gift for someone
80. Listening to music
81. Making friends
82. Planning parties
83. Baking
84. Going hiking/bushwalking
85. Writing books (poems, articles)
86. Sewing
87. Buying clothes
88. Working
89. Going out for dinner
90. Discussing books
91. Sightseeing
92. Gardening
93. Going to the beauty salon
94. Early morning coffee and newspaper
95. Playing tennis
96. Kissing
97. Watching my children (play)
98. Taking a shower
99. Going to plays and concerts
100. Daydreaming
101. Planning to go to college or university
102. Going for a drive
103. Listening to a stereo
104. Refinishing furniture
105. Watching old films
106. Making to-do lists
107. Going bike riding
108. Walks on the riverfront/shoreline
109. Buying/making gifts
110. Traveling to national parks
111. Completing a task
112. Thinking about my achievements
113. Going to a sporting event
114. Eating gooey, fattening foods
115. Exchanging emails, chatting on the internet
116. Photography
117. Going fishing
118. Thinking about pleasant events
119. Staying on a diet
120. Stargazing
121. Making paper planes
122. Reading fiction
123. Acting
124. Having "me time"
125. Writing diary/journal entries or letters
126. Cleaning/household chores
127. Reading non-fiction
128. Taking children to fun places (e.g., the zoo)
129. Dancing
130. Going on a picnic
131. Thinking "I did that pretty well" after doing something
132. Meditation/Mindfulness exercises
133. Playing volleyball
134. Having lunch with a friend
135. Making a gratitude list
136. Thinking about having a family
137. Thinking about happy moments in my childhood



138. Splurging
139. Playing cards
140. Having a political discussion
141. Solving riddles mentally
142. Playing tennis
143. Seeing and/or showing photos or slides
144. Swimming in the ocean/pool
145. Doing crossword puzzles
146. Shooting pool/Playing billiards
147. Dressing up and looking nice
148. Reflecting on how I have improved
149. Buying things for myself
150. Talking on the phone
151. Going to museums and art galleries
152. Thinking religious thoughts
153. Surfing the internet
154. Lighting candles
155. Listening to the radio
156. Going out for breakfast
157. Having coffee at a cafe
158. Getting a massage
159. Saying "I love you"
160. Thinking about my good qualities
161. Buying books
162. Having a spa or sauna
163. Going skiing
164. Getting a haircut
165. Going bowling
166. Doing woodworking
167. Fantasizing about the future
168. Doing ballet, jazz/tap dancing
169. Debating
170. Playing computer games
171. Having an aquarium
172. Getting a new pet
173. Doing volunteer work
174. Going rock climbing
175. Thinking about becoming active in the community
176. Doing something new
177. Making jigsaw puzzles
178. Thinking I am a person who can cope
179. Playing with my pets
180. Having a barbecue
181. Rearranging the furniture in my house
182. Buying new furniture
183. Going window shopping
184. Saying yes to an opportunity
185. Making my bed in the morning



Appendix C: My Activity Planner (What, When and Where)

Week starting:

/ /

Activity	What?	When?	Where?	Done?	Mood
Activity #1					/10
Activity #2					/10
Activity #3					/10
Activity #4					/10
Activity #5					/10
Activity #6					/10
Activity #7					/10
Activity #8					/10



Week starting:

/ /

Activity	What?	When?	Where?	Done?	Mood
Activity #1					/10
Activity #2					/10
Activity #3					/10
Activity #4					/10
Activity #5					/10
Activity #6					/10
Activity #7					/10
Activity #8					/10



Week starting:

/ /

Activity	What?	When?	Where?	Done?	Mood
Activity #1					/10
Activity #2					/10
Activity #3					/10
Activity #4					/10
Activity #5					/10
Activity #6					/10
Activity #7					/10
Activity #8					/10



Appendix D: Troubleshooting

Sometimes our activities do not quite go as planned, despite our good intentions. If this happens to you, the following troubleshooting ideas may help:

1. If your mood has not yet improved, remember that Behavioral Activation is not a quick fix. You may not notice its effect on your mood for a few weeks, so try to keep at it even if you are not feeling better yet. Remember that very strong evidence suggests that Behavioral Activation improves depression and low mood, so do your best to complete your scheduled activities despite how you are feeling at the time.
2. If you have had low energy or motivation to complete your activities, try making a start regardless of this, as the less active we are, the less energy we have, and vice versa.
3. If the activity feels too large or overwhelming, try breaking it down into smaller, more achievable steps.
4. If you cannot find the time to complete your activity, take a moment to think about who could help you or what you could do less of in your everyday life to make room for your Behavioral Activation activities.