

Behavioral Activation

Behavioral activation (BA) is a practice for preventing and interrupting depression, in which we **purposefully schedule and engage in activities** that are potentially enjoyable, useful or meaningful. **BA is one of the most robustly useful things one can do** for their mood.

Depression can be self-maintaining by default.

- Low mood and anhedonia reduce motivation to do usual activities, and make previously-rewarding activities less so.
- As a result, many of us respond by doing less (e.g., skipping social plans, staying inside, reducing hobbies or exercise).
 - In the short term, **withdrawal is temporarily reinforced** by the relief and ease of removing demands.
- But the **long-term costs of withdrawal** are many:
 - We **miss out on the rewards** that would still follow these activities even when depressed (e.g. endorphins from exercise, social support, opportunities arising from being in contact with the world).
 - With fewer opportunities for reframing, **unhelpful thought patterns** can become entrenched (e.g., “Doing X won’t be worth it.”).
 - **Neglecting important things** (e.g., falling behind at work).
 - **Reduced emotional self-efficacy** (i.e., trust in one’s ability to tolerate, and act effectively in the presence of, difficult emotions)
- Paying these costs makes us feel worse, and the cycle continues.

NB. It’s true that most depressive episodes remit naturally (i.e., mood returns to normal) even in the absence of intervention. But this doesn’t make BA unnecessary: sooner is better when it comes to improving subjective wellbeing and reducing opportunity costs.

BA increases chances of remission by:

- Reducing the long-term costs associated with withdrawal (i.e., “not fueling the fire”).
- Increasing the likelihood of experiencing reward.
- Increasing emotional self-efficacy.
- Increasing **psychological flexibility**: reducing the force of habit and unlocking a broader repertoire of possible behaviors one can do when depressed.

Activities targeted in BA should be one or more of the following:

- **Pleasant/rewarding** (or used to be before you were depressed)
 - E.g., hobbies, exercise, socializing
- **Useful** (or blocking something important)
 - E.g., getting groceries, making appointments, responding to messages
- **Meaningful**: Inspired by your own values
 - E.g., calling a relative, attending a protest
- **Nonhabitual**: Something you don’t already do regularly
 - E.g., going on a walk, getting up earlier, learning about something new

How to do BA:

- There is no gold standard for how many activities to schedule, or how to track them. Try to land on a practice that is **realistic, sustainable and easy to track/remember**.
- Each day, pick 1-3 activities from the categories above. Schedule them in a way you'll notice - e.g. adding to a calendar you regularly look at, posting a weekly to-do list.
- **Don't wait for motivation.** BA is about overriding the default habit pattern of depressive withdrawal - so **it probably won't feel natural or worthwhile before you start**.
- **Pay attention to self-talk.** Aim for a stance of compassion, patience, and encouragement. Gently remind yourself why the activities are worth doing.
 - If you find yourself relating with threats, coercion, or self-recrimination, pause and see if you can find your way back to [self-compassion](#). If you feel completely unwilling to do the planned BA, ask what you would be willing to do, and adjust.
- Try to do BA consistently for at least two weeks. **Monitor your mood and sense of accomplishment.** You can do this as often as before and after each activity if you enjoy tracking (with ratings 0-10), or as infrequently as fortnightly (using the [PHQ-9](#)).

BA overlaps with and often involves the same actions as:

- [Physical self-care](#) that's worth doing regardless of your mental health concerns
- [Committed action](#), in which you deliberately take actions in line with values
- [Exposure therapy](#), in which you deliberately approach emotionally challenging situations without engaging in avoidance
 - We can think of BA as "willingly exposing to and accepting the feeling of doing things in the absence of motivation."