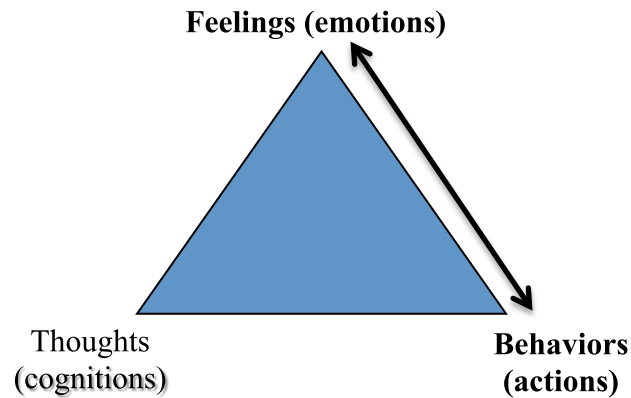


# Behavioural Activation

modified from: <https://medicine.umich.edu/sites/default/files/content/downloads/Behavioral-Activation-for-Depression.pdf>



**Have you ever noticed that certain things that you do influence your mood or anxiety? For example: When you listen to sad music do you ever notice feeling sad for longer periods of time? Do you ever feel less motivated to apply for a job or school when you are actively worrying?**

**Behavioral activation has to do with the way that behaviors and feelings influence each other.**

**You'll learn how to use skills to put yourself in situations that will make it most likely to improve your mood.**



## Action precedes emotion!?

We often wait to feel better or more motivated before doing something.

So activate! Firstly, activating changes our brain state and can make us feel better, right away. For example, exercise can produce “good chemicals” in the brain that lift mood while they are in the bloodstream. Secondly, the more that we activate, the more situations we find ourselves in that can give us positive experiences. The technical term for this is “reinforcing positive context contingencies.” Technicalities aside, we need to “get out there” and give ourselves the best chance of feeling better, even if we don’t feel like it at the time.



### Behavioral Activation involves:

- Monitoring our daily activities
- Identification of goals and values
- Building an upward spiral of motivation and energy through pleasure and mastery
- Activity Scheduling: purposefully scheduling in enjoyable and meaningful activities
- Problem solving around potential barriers to activation
- Reducing avoidance
- Working as a team to make gradual, systematic, sustained progress. Change doesn't happen over night!
- Using between-session assignments. Practice changes the brain, little by little!

# Dealing with Low Motivation



Frequently we hear people talk about waiting to make changes when they are “ready” as if there is a particular day that they will wake up and suddenly feel different and able to face whatever it is they are avoiding. We put off exercise routines, diets, getting homework done, calling back important people, etc., because we feel unmotivated.

## *From the outside-in...*

As we discussed in the “Action Precedes Emotion?” section earlier, one reason we struggle with motivation is that we are looking to our internal emotional state (happy, energized, excited) to cue us to start a task. This is an “inside-out” way of thinking which is problematic, because for most people, low motivation/energy is a pervasive symptom that typically takes some time to resolve.

In Behavioral Activation we ask people to work from the outside-in, acting according to a plan rather than waiting to feel ready. We can jump-start our mood by starting with an action and letting our mood follow. This is hard at first, but over time, most people recognize that their actions can actually have an impact on their mood, so they feel less at the mercy of their depression.



## **Little by little...**

Working on doing things that you have been avoiding can sometimes feel painful or even cause some anxiety. While plunging into these behaviors might seem ideal, you will likely have more success if you commit to taking small steps.

For example, if you identify exercise as a goal, you might break this down into steps.

If you’d like to run, but you’ve been inactive for months, chances are you’re not going to just start running. By breaking this down into smaller goals you will likely have more success. Let’s say you set a goal to put on your shoes and walk for 10 minutes, then 20, then 30, etc. Once you’ve built some momentum, you then might begin to run.

Use the “Motivation Tips” on the following page to help you get unstuck when low motivation strikes.



# Motivation Tips

1. Keep it simple
2. Break it into smaller pieces
3. Do one thing at a time
4. Set realistic goals
5. Schedule activities at times when you are most likely to succeed
6. Use self-compassion
7. Anticipate setbacks
8. Reinforce and reward healthy behavior choices
9. Reflect on what works and what doesn't work
10. Change your environment
11. Minimize distractions
12. Use visual reminders
13. Talk yourself into it—challenge negative thinking!
14. Use a timer—start with just five minutes
15. Use reminders/alarms
16. Have an accountability partner
17. Focus on long-term benefits
18. Commit to making decisions based on what we know, not on what we feel



# Behavioral Activation Tips

Behavioral Activation can be challenging! It is common to run into roadblocks during this process and have moments in which we want to give up. We can honestly say that the only barrier to improvement is giving up completely; if you continue to learn about your valued life course and stay “out there,” chances are that things will improve.



Use the tips below to help navigate barriers that come up during the course of Behavioral Activation treatment.

1. **Be prepared for a challenge:** because we are working against our brain's attempts to protect us, it takes effort and some discomfort to get results from Behavioral Activation in the long run.
2. **Get “back on the horse:”** when failures inevitably happen, be prepared to respond actively. Depression will tell us to give up when things don't go well... and try to convince us that all of those negative thoughts are the truth. Prove the depression wrong by getting back out there and moving toward what you really value.
3. **Move one step at a time:** retraining the brain takes time, one small step at a time. Trying to move too quickly is a recipe for failure and disappointment, and overwhelms us so that we want to give up.
4. **Address negative thinking:** go back and review the Cognitive Therapy Skills chapter and continue to address the thinking that tries to keep us isolated. Especially address self-critical thoughts and develop self-compassion.
5. **Focus on valued action, not just on “symptom reduction.”** Gauge success according to the extent that you are living a valued life, not whether or not you have emotions. While one aim of CBT is to improve mood and have fewer negative emotions in the long run, in the short run we must remember that emotions are a part of life and we cannot get rid of them completely. But... we can improve life and how we feel by moving toward valued actions.

Continued on the next page...

6. **Monitor your activities and mood as specifically as you can.** We often miss important clues to treating depression when we don't pay enough attention to the details of our activity.
7. **Solve problems** that could be leading to further depressive symptoms, and work to accept those things that cannot be solved, while continuing to move toward life aims to the best of your ability.
8. **Be sure your activities line up with your true values.** Sometimes we think we are living a valued life and we are not; this leads to continual disappointments. Continue to explore your values. Remember that *values are not internal states, how people treat us, or specific things to achieve.*
9. Be sure you **have the skills you need to be successful.** Trying to do something in which we don't have the necessary skills sets us up for failure. Some people learn that they are "incompetent," only because they continue to try to do things for which they are not ready. Find out what skills are necessary to be successful at a given task, and then, given the amount of work it would take to learn the necessary skills, decide if it makes sense to continue to pursue that activity.
10. **Understand the principles of Behavioral Activation** and why each part of it is necessary. Sometimes we are confused about why we are doing something; this potentially leads to resistance to trying new things, and we miss out on the possible benefits.
11. **Practice mindfulness:** review Chapter 3 and practice mindfulness. Research shows that enjoyment is much more likely when we are present and mindful. Use Behavioral Activation as an opportunity to practice being mindful of potentially pleasurable experiences as they occur.
12. **Reward yourself** for your achievements. Depression and self-criticism try to take away the "kudos" we deserve when we achieve something. Make an explicit effort to reward yourself instead.

# Barriers and Resources Worksheet

Use the following worksheet to determine the specifics of some of your goals. Think about possible barriers and resources you might have to hurdle them.

Goal: \_\_\_\_\_

When I want to achieve it: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How I am going to do it: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How I am going to measure it: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What are possible barriers? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What are the possible resources? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_