



Behavioral activation

An Everyday Insight tool
mybehavioralactivation.com



Motivation often shows up after starting, not before.

Behavioral activation is a way of working on low mood by changing what you do, one small step at a time. Instead of waiting until you feel like doing something, you plan small, specific activities, do them as planned, and pay attention to how they actually went. Therapists use it on its own or as part of cognitive behavioral therapy.



Behavioral activation works on the doing side of the loop, because that's the part you can change today, before you feel any different.

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
	Walk to the corner and back after dinner <i>Done</i>	Text someone back <i>Done</i>	Pay one bill <i>Done</i>	Eat a meal with someone <i>Not this time. Too tired. Make it smaller.</i>	Clean the kitchen <i>The smaller version. Cleared one counter.</i>	Listen to one album, start to finish <i>Done</i>	Nothing planned
Enjoyment	45	70	10		20	85	
Accomplishment	60	40	85		70	25	

An example week. Each plan is small and specific. Afterward, enjoyment and accomplishment are rated separately, from 0 to 100.

Acting before you feel like it

Most of us wait to feel motivated before we start. When mood is low, that feeling may not come on its own. Behavioral activation flips the order. You decide ahead of time what you'll do and when, then do it whether or not you feel like it. Low mood can also make things look harder or more unpleasant ahead of time than they turn out to be. So go by the plan, not by how the activity looks beforehand.

Choosing activities

A useful week usually has a mix. Some activities bring enjoyment. Some bring a sense of accomplishment, like paying a bill or finishing a chore, even if they aren't fun. Some keep you connected to people. Some are routine, like regular meals, a shower, and a set bedtime, which keep the day from coming apart.

Starting small

Big plans are easy to make and hard to start. Smaller works better. Clear one counter. Walk for ten minutes. Answer one email. If even that feels like too much, go smaller again.

Making a plan you're likely to keep

Plans are more likely to happen when they're specific. Linking an activity to something you already do helps.

How it went

Rate enjoyment and accomplishment separately. A hard phone call might be low for enjoyment and high for accomplishment. On a rough day, getting dressed can count for a lot.

When plans don't happen

Plans won't always happen. That's expected, and it doesn't mean you've failed. A missed plan is useful information. Maybe it was too big, the timing was off, or another part of life got in the way. The question is what you learned about the plan, not what's wrong with you.

Avoidance, and what to try instead

When something feels hard, avoiding it brings quick relief. The trouble is the cost that comes later. Avoidance doesn't always look like doing nothing. Scrolling, sleeping in, keeping busy with easy chores, or going over a problem in your head can all be ways of staying away from something harder. The other choice is usually small and specific, and it moves toward the thing you were avoiding. Reply with one line. Call for two minutes.

With a therapist

Behavioral activation is often done with a therapist, who helps choose activities, looks at what got in the way, and adjusts the plan from week to week. If your therapist uses a different form or different words, go with theirs.

When to get more help

Talk with a doctor or a mental health professional if low mood has lasted more than two weeks, if it's getting worse, or if it's making it hard to work, study, or take care of yourself or others. If you have bipolar disorder, plan changes in your activity and sleep with your clinician. A big jump in activity, or sleeping less, can sometimes bring on mania or hypomania. If you have a health condition or physical limits, check with your doctor about what activity is safe for you.



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