

Getting active during depression

Depression can take away your ability to experience life's pleasures and rewards. Even when rewards are present, depression makes it hard to see them. Anxiety and fear, which often come along with depression, can make you avoid the things you need or want in your life, such as making friends or starting work. The result of all this is a vicious cycle of less activity and more depression and anxiety.

Behavioral Activation is a method of monitoring your behavior and gradually changing patterns that promote depression. It is based on a type of therapy that has been proven to treat depression, and works best when you have a therapist to guide you through it.

① Begin by increasing your awareness of what you do each moment of the day and how it impacts you. Keep an hourly record of your activities and note the effect each has on your mood.

What you think about is just as relevant as what you do, and thinking is also an activity, so take notice of the way your thoughts affect your mood as well.

② As you develop this awareness, keep a list of activities which improve your mood. In the midst of depression these may be hard to find, so look to the past as well:

- 1) What activities used to give you a sense of accomplishment?
- 2) What are your long- or short-term goals in life? What activities might gradually get you there?
- 3) List things you once liked about yourself or your life, even if you have a hard time believing them now. What can you do that would remind you of them?
- 4) What are some activities you once enjoyed?

You might enlist a friend to help generate ideas. On the back are sample ones that people often enjoy when they're not depressed. You may find some that appeal to you and others that don't – the important thing is to find what is rewarding *to you*. Guided action often works well when

you mix pleasurable activities with constructive ones (the kinds that slowly build towards your own personal goals).

Depression also causes negative beliefs about life, such as "I can't do anything," "I'm not likeable," "No one cares about me," or "Everything turns out bad." If you identify such beliefs, think about how they influence your behavior. Do they lead you more towards your goals or further away? What might you do instead of acting on them? What kinds of activities might test out those beliefs, or even successfully counter them?

③ Now that you have a list, choose things on it that you can accomplish, even if you don't enjoy them now. One of the most important parts of guided activation is *learning to do things based on your awareness of how they affect you rather than on your motivation to do them*.

Your list need not be grand or heroic; what matters most is following it consistently. In fact, this technique works best if you start with easy things and slowly increase them week by week. For example, suppose you used to take pride in yourself as an athlete. Now, in the midst of depression, you find you are tired and never exercise. While it might be asking too much to run a marathon, you may be able to walk for 30 minutes a day, do aerobics for 15 minutes, or simply stretch.

④ Last, prepare a calendar for the upcoming week with several activities from your list scheduled on each day. If you find you can't keep up with the list, try problem-solving with your therapist or choosing easier activities.

Further reading...

Overcoming Depression One Step at a Time, by Michael E. Addis and Christopher Martell. (A self-help guide).

150 Ways to Beat Depression

Constructive Ideas

Exercise
Work in a garden
Clean your room
Write a poem
Wash your car
Reorganize your room
Plant a tree
Decorate your room
Work on your car
Clean out one closet
Learn to draw
Clean something
Get to work early
Try a new, easy recipe
Organize your apps, bookmarks, or bookshelves
Practice a sport, karate, or yoga
Work on a photo album
Plan how to lose weight
Throw out old papers
Gently stretch your muscles
Take a class in something that interests you
Read the Bible or a spiritual text
Plan your career
Plan how to save money or get out of debt
Recycle old items
Make plans for finishing school
Give things to a charity
Organize your playlists
Complete a task (any task)

Relaxation

Take a warm bubble bath
Practice breathing slowly
Practice mindfulness
Go buy an ice cream cone
Walk in the rain
Think about things that you've accomplished
Sit by a warm fire
Eat a strawberry
Walk barefoot on soft cool grass
Eat a slice of fresh-baked bread
Find a quiet place to sit outside and enjoy nature
Make a list of things you are thankful for
Sit in a coffeehouse and read
Have breakfast in bed
Buy yourself a rose
Walk on a scenic path in a park
Drink some hot cocoa, tea, or cider
Write in your journal
Pet a friendly dog or cat
Have a manicure or pedicure
Stop and smell some flowers
Think about finishing school
Try a food you've never tasted

Wake up early and watch the sunrise
Watch the sunset
Relax with soothing music
Play your favorite music and dance to it by yourself
Go to bed early
Sleep outside under the stars
Fix a special dinner for yourself
Go for a walk
Light candles
Sing or whistle around the house
Pray
Take a sauna
Daydream
Laugh
Give yourself more time than you need to accomplish whatever you're doing
Get a massage
Take a cozy nap
Listen to your favorite CD
Get a facial
Have a day with nothing to do
Paint your nails

Fun, Travel, and Entertainment

Go see a film or show
Go to a pet store and play with the animals
Visit a zoo
Visit a town you've never been to
Explore a new hobby
Go rent a funny video
Go out to your favorite restaurant
Go to the beach
Take a scenic drive
Buy new clothes
Browse in a book or record store for as long as you want
Buy yourself something special that you can afford
Go to the park—feed the ducks, swing on the swings, and go down the slide
Visit a museum or another interesting place
Work on a puzzle book or adult coloring book
Go dancing
Research your family tree
Read a book
Go bowling or skating
Go shopping
Start an aquarium
Go to a sporting event
Learn a magic trick
Go fishing
Play cards
Bake cookies
Take some pictures
Plan a day trip

Throw snowballs
Learn to needlepoint
Go swimming
Watch a ballet
Read or memorize a poem
Listen to a symphony
Read a story curled up in bed
Look at a work of art
Do something you've never done before
Feed the birds
Memorize a joke
Go on a picnic
Take a different route to work
Play solitaire
Window shop on your favorite street
Play a board game
Learn to sail, canoe, or ride horses
Do a crossword puzzle
Shoot pool
Plan an easy, restful vacation
Listen to books on tape
Go out to your favorite restaurant
Look through travel brochures and dream
Visit your local library and browse the shelves
Take pictures of your family
Write your life story
Plan a hike or camping trip
Read magazines or newspapers

Social

Call a good friend
Play in intramural sports
Go to church or a prayer group
E-mail a friend
Smile
Practice listening to others
Plan a surprise birthday party
Meet new people
Join or start a book club
Plan lunch with a friend
Go on a date or spend time alone with your partner
Make a gift for family or a friend
Watch children play
Do volunteer work
Get involved in a club
Teach a child to fly a kite
Take acting lessons
Say something nice to someone
Play with a toddler or baby
Write a note to a far away friend
Freely praise other people
Tell a friend how much you appreciate them

Read more: *Overcoming Depression One Step at a Time*, by ME Addis and C Martell. New Harbinger Books, 2004