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SKILL SHEET

Act First, Feel Later

Behavioral activation

How to break the cycle of low motivation with small, planned actions, before you feel like it.

When you are depressed, it makes sense to pull back. But pulling back cuts you off from the things that lift mood, so you feel worse and pull back more. **Behavioral activation** runs this in reverse: you plan small, specific activities and do them whether or not you feel like it, and your mood follows, often over days to weeks. It is one of the best-studied treatments for depression, and you can start it on your own.

THE LOOP THAT KEEPS DEPRESSION GOING

Low mood, no energy → Pull back, skip things → Fewer good moments → Mood drops further ↻

THE LOOP YOU ARE BUILDING

One small, planned action → A small lift, or a sense of "I did that" → A bit more energy → The next step is easier ↻

HOW TO DO IT

1. **Watch one week first.** Jot down what you do each hour (a few words) and rate your mood from 0 (worst) to 10 (best). Notice what lifts your mood and what drags it down.
2. **Pick activities that fuel you.** Mix three kinds: things that matter to you (being a good parent, friend or neighbor), things you enjoy, and things that give a sense of "I did that."
3. **Schedule them, and start small.** Give each a day, time and place, like an appointment. Start with 2 or 3 so small that saying no feels silly (shoes on and out the door). On good days, do only what you could repeat tomorrow.
4. **Do it, rate it, count it.** Do it whether or not you feel like it, then rate your mood. Early on it may feel flat: judge the day by what you did. Each week, see what helped and plan more of it.

MY PLAN (MOOD 0 = WORST, 10 = BEST)

DAY AND TIME	WHAT I PLANNED (OR DID INSTEAD)	DONE?	MOOD AFTER, 0 TO 10
		☐	_____ / 10
		☐	_____ / 10
		☐	_____ / 10
		☐	_____ / 10

WHEN YOU CANNOT GET STARTED

- **Use the five-minute rule.** Do five minutes, with real permission to stop. Five minutes still counts.
- **Shrink it.** Walk to the mailbox. Wash one dish.
- **Line it up:** shoes by the door the night before, or a friend who expects you.
- **Be kind to yourself:** "This is hard, and I can do the small version."

REST, OR AVOIDANCE?

Rest is chosen ahead of time and leaves you restored. **Avoidance** is something you drift into to escape a task or a feeling. It brings relief for an hour, then you feel worse. Rest is allowed: plan it.

Missed a day? Cross it out, write what you did instead, and do the smallest version tomorrow.

IF YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT SUICIDE OR HURTING YOURSELF

Call or text **988** (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) any time, or go to the nearest emergency room. If you are in immediate danger, call **911**. Tell your clinician if low mood is not lifting.

Source. Adapted from the Therapy in a Nutshell videos on behavioral activation by Emma McAdam, LMFT. The log, the three kinds of activity and the five-minute rule are standard behavioral activation.

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