Behavioral Activation: The Goal of This Approach

The goal of this approach is to reduce the depression and or posttraumatic stress symptoms you may be experiencing, and to prevent the likelihood that you will have these problems in the future.

Behavioral activation is designed to provide you with tools so that you can actively manage problems in your life. We have found that people who use proactive ways of solving their problems also reduce their depression and PTSD symptoms and overall find that their quality of life is better.

One of the key things about this approach is that it is tailored to your specific life circumstances. It will help you identify coping that may be working in the short-run, but is also leading to other problems (e.g., alcohol use, avoidance, isolation, etc.). You and your Behavioral Activation coach will then come up with strategies, and trouble-shoot possible barriers so that you can use a proactive approach to increase your involvement in meaningful activities that are likely to lead to greater sense of fulfillment.

Why this Approach?

Depression and posttraumatic stress disorder can create vicious cycles for many people. After a stressful or traumatic experience, it is natural to stop doing many of the things that you were doing previously. This can be because of new physical limitations and pain, financial limitations, or because of the depression or stress symptoms you are experiencing.

By doing less, however, you are actually increasing the likelihood that you will continue to experience depression and PTSD. In addition, patterns of avoidance or withdraw from life can create other problems over time, such as the loss of relationships, work, or healthy lifestyle behaviors. This can create a downward spiral, with an increasing number of problems contributing to feelings of being overwhelmed.

Anxiety is a normal reaction to stressful events, sudden changes, or traumatic events. When people feel depressed or anxious, they tend to avoid the things that bring about feelings of sadness or anxiety. This is a natural reaction. However, by avoiding life activities, your life doesn’t improve and you never learn that the things that make you feel anxious may not be harmful or dangerous. The main way to get over depression or anxiety is to maintain an active and social lifestyle. And if you do have some physical limitations that make it difficult or impossible to maintain some activities, figuring out how to get
the same sort of things from new activities can still help break the avoidance/anxiety cycle.

It is important to recognize that depression and anxiety do not reflect some personal defect in you. They are natural reactions to difficult challenges in life and these reactions are signals that something needs to be done to change your life.

The problem is that when people get depressed and anxious, instead of changing their lives in ways that are likely to improve their well-being, many people tend to withdraw from the world, blame themselves, and their problems tend to get worse.

**Taking Action**

Guided activity can break the cycles of depression and anxiety while replacing unhealthy behaviors. With the help of your Behavioral Activation coach, you can identify patterns of avoidance and withdrawal and then find ways of increasing your activity to re-engage with the world—but not just any activity. The activities that are meaningful to you and your life are what are important. Engaging in activities that reflect your personal goals can replace unhealthy coping strategies, such as avoidance and withdrawal.

**Advantages of Guided Activity**

The Behavioral Activation coach will help you to guide your activities in the direction that matches with your personal goals. The Behavioral Activation coach will also help you pace yourself as you get back on track. This is important because trying to "dive back in" to life too quickly can sometimes lead people to feel overwhelmed or frustrated. For example, when starting a fitness routine, trying to do too much too fast can cause injury which might actually take you away from your goal. By contrast, progressing your fitness routine week-by-week builds a foundation for success.

- **Guided activity will help you feel less tired.** Normally, when you are tired, you need rest. When you are depressed, the opposite is usually true. You need to actually do more. Doing nothing will only make you feel more lethargic and exhausted. Doing nothing also leaves your mind unoccupied, so you are more likely to worry about difficulties, and to feel even more anxious and depressed.
• **Guided activity motivates you to do more.** Many people who are depressed have the thought that if they only had the motivation, they would do more and overcome their depression. What has been clearly learned, however, is that being active itself is the most effective way to increase motivation. The more you do, the more you feel like doing.

• **Guided activity will help you to feel less anxious and afraid.** By doing activities that you are now avoiding because of anxiety, you will find over time that they are not as difficult or dangerous as you now think; again, this is like getting back in shape—you are building up strength and confidence as you go.

• **Guided activity improves the way you think.** Once you get started, problems that you thought you could do nothing about come into perspective. The unmanageable becomes manageable, and your mood will improve.

**PROBLEM-SOLVING**

Hopefully, the benefits of getting reconnected with important parts of your life makes sense. However, this is not always easy, particularly if you are experiencing symptoms of depression and or PTSD. You may also be experiencing pain or physical limitations that make your usual activities difficult or not possible. Depression, PTSD and pain may affect your motivation and your energy might be very low, making it hard to do even the most basic things. Your Behavioral Activation coach understands this and will work with you to help you to recognize the things that get in the way of activating and help you to overcome those obstacles.

**Steps in Doing Guided Activity**

Working with your Behavioral Activation coach, you will learn how to monitor your life, and look at your daily activities in a new way. You will be more aware of the activities you can do, and what activities might make you feel less anxious or depressed—either because they help you face your fears, or because they give you more meaningful and enjoyable experiences. Together, you will work out a plan uniquely tailored to your situation to optimize your daily activity schedule to make you feel better.

Your Behavioral Activation coach will teach you how to plan activities, how to recognize traps that prevent activity, and how to add new activities into your daily routine, developing new habits that lead to improvements in the quality of your life. Your Behavioral Activation coach will instruct you in the use of daily activity charts that will help you in this process. You will be asked to continue the
work begun in sessions during the week(s) between sessions. You and your Behavioral Activation coach will agree on assignments that will aid in the process of becoming more active. Taking the first step and coming to get assistance has been your first guided activity. Further steps may be easier than you imagine.

**A Concluding Comment—Trusting Yourself**

This program is designed to teach you behavioral activation and problem-solving strategies, many of which you may already be using in your daily life. The goal is to help you engage in activities, some of which might be initially difficult or challenging (either physically or emotionally demanding). While it is important that you try these activities even when they are difficult, it is equally important that you don’t push yourself beyond what is helpful to you. Do not engage in activities that cause you unnecessary physical pain. Do not overwhelm or exhaust yourself. Do try to regularly take steps to work against avoidance and get back into life. Trust yourself and don’t give up.
Goal Identification/Development

Questions to Guide this Process:

- Of all the ways you and your life have been affected since you have been experiencing depression or PTSD, what concerns you the most?
- What would you like to get out of our work together?
- What are your goals for yourself? (short term, long term)
- What gives you meaning, pleasure?
- What gave you meaning, pleasure before you began feeling depressed or developed PTSD?
- It seems like many of the activities you used to enjoy are not possible right now, let’s see if we can look at what it was you got from those activities, and see if there is any way different activities might give you some of that.
- There is a lot of loss involved in losing activities that gave you pleasure, and it seems important to grieve that. Without minimizing that, there may be ways we can also start to think about activities that might be new and different (and do-able) that might be able to give you pleasure and meaning as well.
- Imagining the depression or PTSD reactions are behind you, what would a satisfying life consist of for you?