



When Depression Says "Wait Until You Feel Like It"

An explainer, activity-mood map, and behavioural activation planner · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)

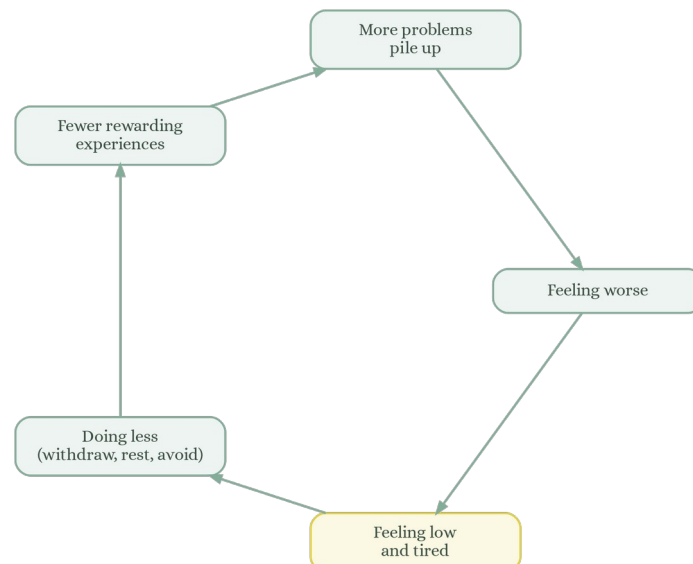
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At a glance

- Depression often tells you to wait until you have energy or motivation before doing anything.
- But motivation usually follows action, not the other way around.
- Behavioural activation, gently scheduling small meaningful activities, is one of the most effective treatments for depression.

The waiting trap

When you're depressed, it makes sense to want to rest until you feel better. The problem is that depression often deepens with inactivity. Withdrawing from friends, hobbies, and responsibilities means fewer rewarding moments, more problems piling up, and more reasons to feel low. This becomes a cycle.



Outside-in, not inside-out

Most of us wait to feel motivated, then act ("inside-out"). Behavioural activation flips this. You act according to a plan, and mood tends to follow ("outside-in"). You don't need to feel like it. You only need to do a small version of it.

Two kinds of activities that help

Type	What it means	Examples
Pleasure	Activities that bring enjoyment, comfort, or connection	Music, a walk, a call with a friend, a favourite meal
Mastery	Activities that bring a sense of accomplishment	Paying a bill, tidying one shelf, finishing a small task
Values	Activities connected to what matters to you	Helping someone, prayer or reflection, time with family

What the research says

A randomized trial found that behavioural activation was as effective as antidepressant medication for adults with more severe depression, and more effective than cognitive therapy in that group (Dimidjian et al., 2006).

A meta-analysis confirmed behavioural activation as an effective treatment for depression (Ekers et al., 2014).

Behavioural activation focuses on reducing avoidance and increasing contact with rewarding and meaningful activities (Martell, Dimidjian & Herman-Dunn, 2010).

Tool: My Activity–Mood Map

For one week, note what you did each part of the day and rate your mood (0–10). Patterns usually appear quickly.

Day	Morning (activity / mood)	Afternoon (activity / mood)	Evening (activity / mood)
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			
Sat			
Sun			

My small-steps plan

Activity (graded down to doable)	Type (pleasure / mastery / values)	When	Mood after (0-10)

Strategies to try

- **Start tiny.** Five minutes counts. A walk to the mailbox counts.
- **Schedule it.** Put activities in your calendar with a specific time.
- **Expect resistance.** Your mind may say "What's the point?" Do it anyway and notice what happens.
- **Track, don't judge.** Rate mood before and after, without expecting dramatic change.
- **Connect with someone daily.** Even a short text counts.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Work "outside-in."** Behavioural activation teaches acting according to a plan, not a mood. Write tomorrow's one activity the night before, so morning-you doesn't have to decide.
- **Use TRAP to find TRAC.** Notice your Trigger, your Response (feeling), and your Avoidance Pattern. Then choose an Alternative Coping action. Example: Trigger: a friend texts. Response: tired, unworthy. Avoidance: ignore it. Alternative: reply with one line.
- **Grade it down until it's doable.** If "clean the kitchen" is too much, try "wash three dishes." If that's too much, "fill the sink." The right size is the one you can start today.
- **Be an "attention scientist."** During an activity, notice how often your mind drifts into rumination. Gently bring it back to what your hands, eyes, and ears are doing. Behavioural activation works best when you're present for the activity.
- **Run a "worst hour" experiment.** Track mood hourly for two days. Most people find a predictable low point. Schedule something small and active in that hour.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

What have I stopped doing since I started feeling low?

Which activity, even a small one, has helped my mood a little lately?

What does depression tell me when I try to do something? Is it always right?

What is one small thing I could do tomorrow that the "me" I want to be would do?

When to reach out for support

If low mood has lasted more than two weeks, is affecting daily life, or you're having thoughts of death or suicide, please reach out to a doctor or therapist. Depression is very treatable. If you are thinking about suicide, call or text 9-8-8 any time.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Dimidjian, S., et al. (2006). Randomized trial of behavioral activation, cognitive therapy, and antidepressant medication in the acute treatment of adults with major depression. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 74(4), 658–670.

Ekers, D., et al. (2014). Behavioural activation for depression: An update of meta-analysis of effectiveness and sub group analysis. *PLoS ONE*, 9(6), e100100.

Martell, C. R., Dimidjian, S., & Herman-Dunn, R. (2010). *Behavioral activation for depression: A clinician's guide*. Guilford Press.

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