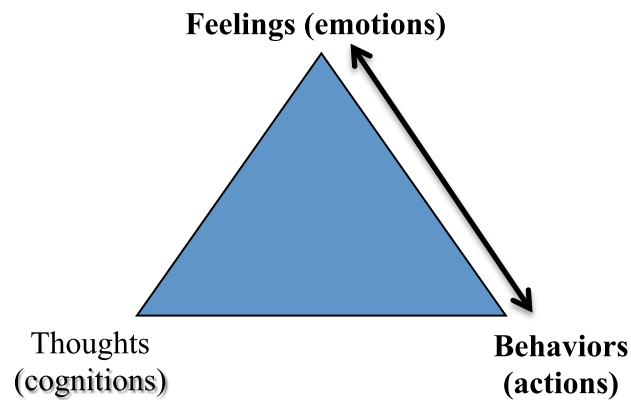


Behavioral Activation for Depression



Have you ever noticed that certain things that you do influence your mood or anxiety? For example: When you listen to sad music do you ever notice feeling sad for longer periods of time? Do you ever feel less motivated to apply for a job or school when you are actively worrying?

Behavioral activation is one of the most important CBT skills used in treating depression. It has to do with the way that behaviors and feelings influence each other.

In this chapter we'll learn how your behavior can directly affect your mood, for better or worse, and how to use skills to put ourselves in situations that will make it most likely to improve our mood.



What is Behavioral Activation?

Behavioral Activation (BA) is a specific CBT skill. It can be a treatment all by itself, or can be used alongside other CBT skills such as cognitive restructuring. Behavioral activation helps us understand how behaviors influence emotions, just like cognitive work helps us understand the connection between thoughts and emotions.



Here are some examples of how BA may be used:

Jim deals with depression and anxiety. He has a hard time figuring out why his mood drastically dips and also finds it difficult to understand why he feels better for short periods of time. While working with his schedule in therapy, he began to discover specific mood triggers (how he spent his time or random events) that he had never noticed before. He was able to become more aware of these triggers and change his approach, ultimately allowing him to change his mood.

Debbie knew that her family history, stress with taking care of her special needs son, and seasonal change contribute to her depression. Though she knows the triggers, she struggles with managing her mood as she often does not feel like doing activities that will help her depression. She often tells herself that she will wait until it warms up outside to exercise and does not feel up to calling her friends who usually cheer her up. With her therapist she began to find strategies to help her motivation by practicing awareness of different avoidance patterns and developing alternative, adaptive behaviors.

Will Behavioral Activation be helpful for me?



Behavioral activation is helpful for many people. If you answer “yes” to any of the following questions, BA could be a good fit for you.

- Do I have a sense of what is triggering my mood or anxiety?
- Do I generally find myself doing very little, with little pleasure or meaning in my life?
- Are there times that I feel better or worse and I’m not sure why?
- Do I have a difficult time working with my negative thoughts, but seem to feel better when I can get myself moving and doing something?
- Do I have a hard time even knowing what I enjoy or find meaning in?

Behavioral Activation is based on the well-researched understanding that depression often keeps us from doing the things that bring enjoyment and meaning to our lives. This “downward spiral” (explained in the first chapter of this manual) causes us to feel even worse. In Behavioral Activation we work to reverse this cycle using our actions and choices.

Behavioral Activation involves:

- Understanding the “vicious cycles” of depression
- Monitoring our daily activities
- Identification of goals and values
- Building an upward spiral of motivation and energy through pleasure and mastery
- Activity Scheduling: purposefully scheduling in enjoyable and meaningful activities
- Problem solving around potential barriers to activation
- Reducing avoidance
- Working as a team to make gradual, systematic, sustained progress. Change doesn’t happen over night!
- Using between-session assignments. Practice changes the brain, little by little!



“But my depression is ‘situational!’”



Yes, it is true that often depression is set in motion by difficult events that happen to us. If you are dealing with a big loss, stressful situation, or change in your life, feelings of depression could be a result. While it is important to address these external events and sometimes to talk about the past, it is also important to find ways to address our current situation, find ways to fulfill on our future life aims, and find time for enjoyment. Behavioral Activation can help with this part of treatment.

Action precedes emotion!?

We often wait to feel better or more motivated before doing something.

Remember that anxiety and depression come from parts of our brain that are really trying to protect us by getting us to avoid or isolate. This means that as long as we are following the lead of the anxiety and depression, we will continue to feel less motivated and want to avoid and isolate.



So why activate first? Firstly, activating changes our brain state and can make us feel better, right away. For example, exercise can produce “good chemicals” in the brain that lift mood while they are in the bloodstream. Secondly, the more that we activate, the more situations we find ourselves in that can give us positive experiences. The technical term for this is “reinforcing positive context contingencies.” Technicalities aside, we need to “get out there” and give ourselves the best chance of feeling better, even if we don’t feel like it at the time.



So, when we are feeling anxious and depressed, we cannot wait on the brain to give us the motivation to get out there and do things. Research has shown that our decision to activate (in other words, to do the opposite of what the depression wants us to do, and do something in line with our values and goals) is necessary for emotions to change.

Note: Behavioral Activation has been shown in research studies to be effective on its own for some people to overcome depression. However, it is often used alongside other therapeutic skills, as it may not address your specific situation all by itself. Consider it just one of many options in your effort to manage depression.

On the next few pages we illustrate the “vicious cycles” of depression, according to the research on depression and Behavioral Activation.



The First Vicious Cycle...

Events often get the depression "ball rolling." This could be something new or a reminder from a past stressful event.

What happened
(stressful life events, triggers from past, etc.)

"I lost my job"
"We had our first child"



How you feel
(emotions)

Sad
Anxious
Stressed
Shut down
Embarrassed

The stress of events leads to negative emotions that are distressing and make us want to draw back.

FIRST VIOUS CYCLE

What you do
(or don't do)

Stay in bed
Don't engage with family
Don't return calls or texts
Avoid people

Emotions lead to behaviors: we avoid or isolate, which makes us feel worse.

The Second Vicious Cycle

Avoidance, isolation, and other behaviors cause further negative events, making us feel even more depressed.

What happened (life events, triggers, etc.)

"I lost my job"
"We had our first child"

* Increased odds of more hardships and negative life events

My friends stop calling me because I never return calls or texts

**SECOND
VICIOUS
CYCLE**

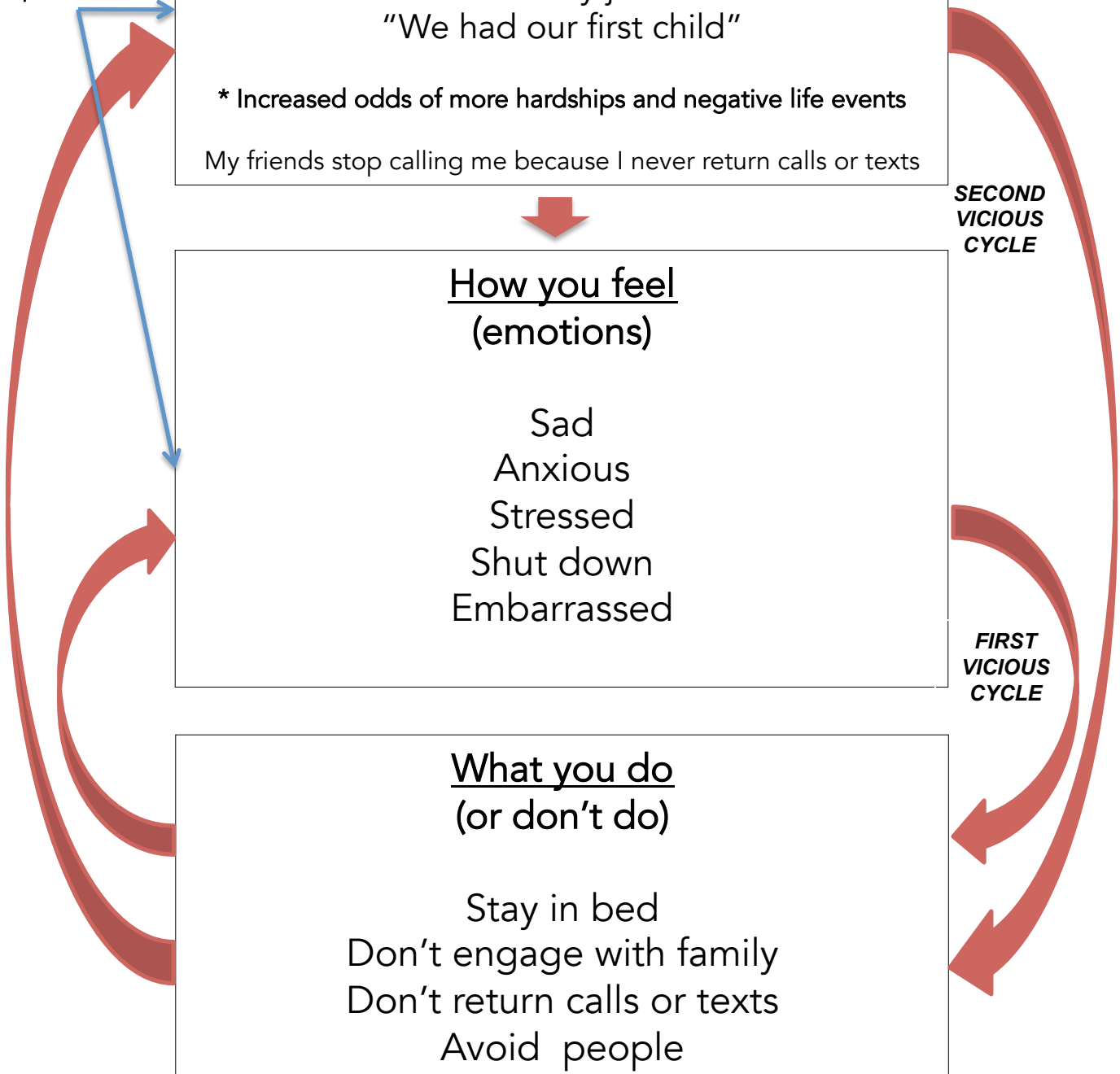
How you feel (emotions)

Sad
Anxious
Stressed
Shut down
Embarrassed

**FIRST
VICIOUS
CYCLE**

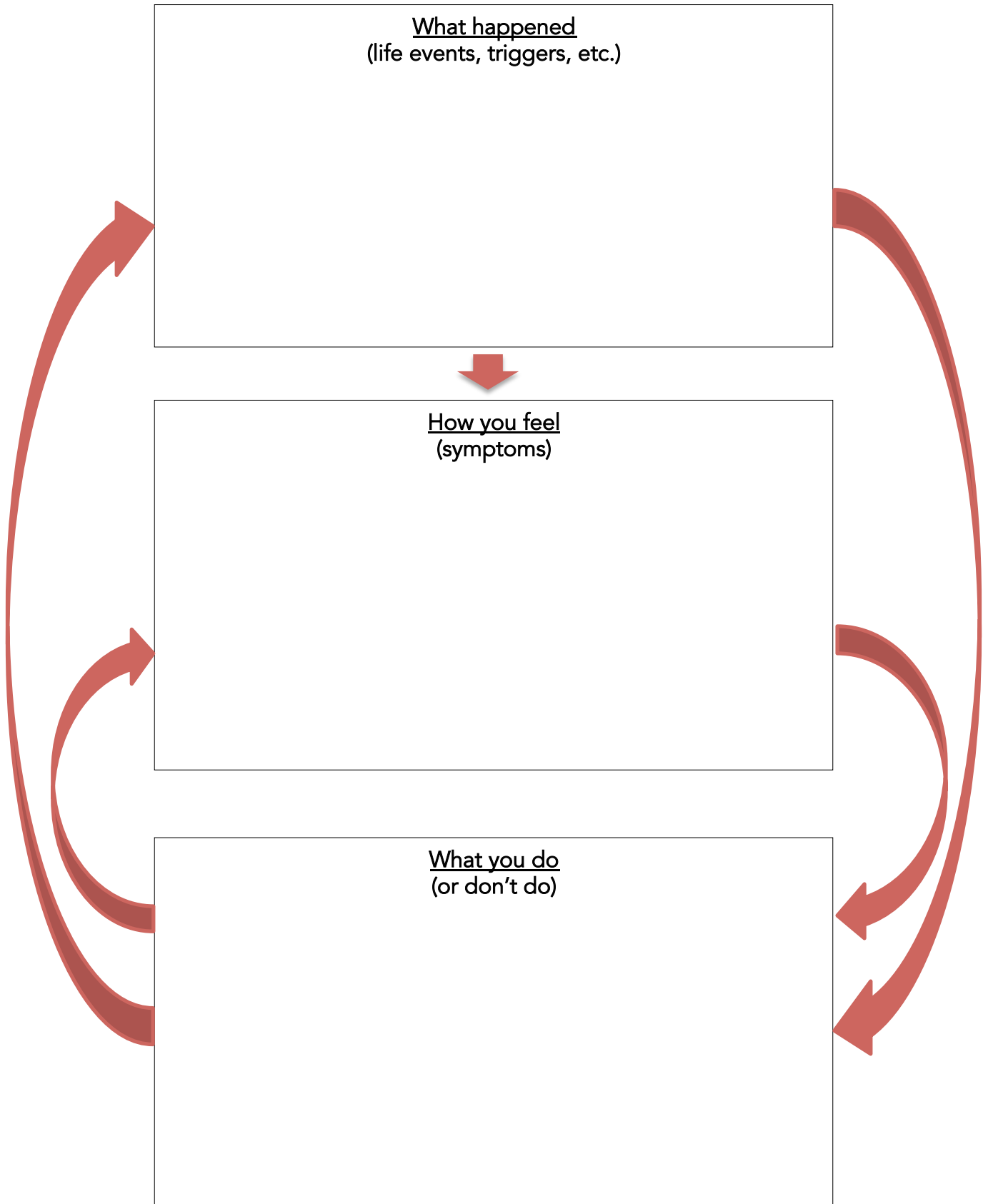
What you do (or don't do)

Stay in bed
Don't engage with family
Don't return calls or texts
Avoid people



Your cycles?

Try to determine your own "vicious cycles," identifying specific events, emotions, and responses.



Activity Monitoring: Track your mood!

Being aware of our mood, emotions, and behaviors is an important part of CBT. In order to know what to do to fix a problem, we first need to understand what is going on!

Activity Monitoring is the first step of Behavioral Activation. It is important to know exactly what we are doing throughout the day, and how this corresponds to our mood.

While we can't fix the depression just by noticing this, we can take a step toward feeling better by understanding which behaviors help us feel better, which continue to maintain the depression as it is, and which make us feel worse.

Use the Activity Monitoring Chart on the next page to start tracking your activities and mood. →

Get out that pen and paper!

Research shows that people who write things down as part of CBT practice do better than those that try to do it all in their heads. While it does involve more work (and may seem like going back to school), we hope you will give it a try at first, until the skills become more natural.



Activity Monitoring Worksheet

Instructions: Record your activity for each hour of the day (what you were doing, with whom, where, etc.). Record a rating for your mood as you were doing each activity. Mood is rated between 0-10, with "0" indicating "low mood" and "10" indicating "good mood."

	Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fr	Sat
5-7:00 am							
7:00 am							
8:00 am							
9:00 am							
10:00 am							
11:00 am							
12:00 pm							
1:00 pm							
2:00 pm							
3:00 pm							
4:00 pm							
5:00 pm							
6:00 pm							
7:00 pm							
8:00 pm							
9:00 pm							
10:00 pm							
11:00 pm							

For example:

Monday:
 8am: Woke up (5)
 9am: Went to go eat breakfast (6)
 10am: Got to work, talked to Bob (5)
 11am: Sitting at my desk reading e-mails (3)
 12pm: Eating lunch at my desk, worrying about meeting (3)
 1pm: Meeting, thinking about issue with reports that I missed, tired (3)
 2pm: Sitting at my desk working (4)
 3pm: Working (4)
 4pm: Working (4)
 5pm: Driving home (6)

UP and DOWN Activities

Based on the mood ratings you recorded on the Activity Monitoring Worksheet, determine which activities helped you to feel more positive ("UP" activities) and which led to feeling down ("DOWN" activities).

Antidepressant/UP Activities	Depressant/DOWN Activities

In Behavioral Activation, one of our aims is to increase "UP" activities and decrease "DOWN" activities. Over the next section we will learn more about the types of activities that will lead to better mood, to add to the list above. Over time, we can replace the "DOWN" activities with more "UP" ones.