

The 10 Core Principles of Behavioral Activation for Clinicians*

Principle 1: *The key to changing how people feel is helping them change what they do.*

Most of our daily routines include activities for which there is little choice, such as going to work every morning or taking care of family or household responsibilities. When people are not depressed they typically do these tasks regardless of whether they feel like it or not. Once there one often finds that a sense of interest and accomplishment follows. We refer to this as acting from the “outside in”: engage in an activity, and the feelings follow. The idea is that if you build a life that is rich and rewarding, the positive feelings will come.

Principle 2: *Changes in life can lead to depression, and short-term coping strategies may keep people stuck over time.*

In BA, we focus on the specific ways that life events can lead to decreases in positive reinforcement or increases in punishment that can result in general dysphoria and general withdrawal from normal activities. These problems can be considered the primary problems in the client’s life. Poor living conditions, unhappy relationships, bad jobs, and ongoing disappointments are all examples of the kinds of problems that can result in the primary problem of low levels of positive reinforcement or high levels of punishment. People often respond to these primary problems with behaviors that keep them stuck.

Principle 3: *The clues to figuring out what will be antidepressant for a particular client lie in what precedes and follows the client’s important behaviors.*

Clients often start treatment feeling demoralized and hopeless about the prospect of finding relief from their depression. The job of the BA therapist is to engage the client in a careful and detailed examination of what behaviors are associated with being depressed and what happens before and after such behaviors occur.

Principle 4: *Structure and schedule activities that follow a plan, not a mood.*

In BA, we ask people to experiment with acting according to a goal, as opposed to acting according to a mood. Engaging in activities that once brought pleasure or a sense of accomplishment or that solve problems can improve mood and reduce life stressors over time. A core part of BA is to begin to act, even when mood and motivation are low, rather than waiting for one’s mood to improve prior to getting engaged. Activity structuring and scheduling is used to support acting from the “outside in”. This is done by creating detailed schedules with tasks broken down into components and assigned at specific times and places.

Principle 5: *Change will be easier when starting small.*

*Excerpts from Behavioral Activation for Depression: A Clinician’s Guide by Christopher Martell, Sona Dimidjian, and Ruth Herman-Dunn

When one is depressed, changing one's behavior can be a tremendous struggle. One job of an effective BA therapist is to break down any behavior into its extremely small elements. An example of this would be to take someone's original goal of running 45 minutes several days a week like they did before they were depressed and breaking this goal into smaller more achievable goals. These smaller goals might look like buying running shoes before the next session, then running 10 minutes several days a week and building over time to the original goal.

Principle 6: *Emphasize activities that are naturally reinforcing.*

An example of an activity that is naturally reinforcing might be a client who has avoided social contact while depressed who begins to practice reengaging coworkers in conversation. When a coworker smiles and expresses interest in the client's communication, the client continues the conversation. In this way, the client receives natural reinforcement from his or her environment. The coworker's behaviors naturally follow the client's behavior. An example of arbitrary reinforcement is giving oneself a caramel after completing the housework. Natural reinforcement increases the likelihood of the client engaging again in the activity.

Principle 7: *Act as a coach.*

Depressed clients generally need encouragement, as some depressed people may underestimate their ability to cope with many life problems or look at all problems as out of their control (Brown & Seigel, 1988). Acting as a coach involves helping guide the process of change and making suggestions to the client when necessary. Compassionate therapists may want to solve the problem for the client, but the good BA therapist maintains a coaching stance and allows clients to become more confident about their own game.

Principle 8: *Emphasize a problem-solving empirical approach, and recognize that all results are useful.*

BA suggests that effective therapy is an ongoing process of developing, evaluating, and trying out potential solutions. We encourage clients to engage in an experimental approach that focuses on trying a behavior and observing the outcome. In BA, the experiments are based on functional analyses of past behavior and hypotheses regarding potentially reinforcing activities for each client. BA therapists and clients work to plan and try a variety of activities, evaluating along the way the impact on clients' mood, productivity, or satisfaction with their lives prior to determining whether or not any behavior is worth continuing.

Principle 9: *Don't just talk, do!*

Activity between sessions – or homework – is at the heart of the BA approach. For depressed patients this is often not easy to do. Homework needs to be developed in collaboration with the client, and the tasks must be kept realistic. As a coach the therapist can help the client discuss an implementation plan. Importantly, homework assigned should be reviewed. When a client reports failure to complete an assignment, the therapist and client need to conduct an analysis

of the problems that resulted in the task not being completed. If the report is that the client was successful, this provides a great opportunity to discuss increasing the frequency or intensity of the activity during the next week.

Principle 10: *Troubleshoot possible and actual barriers to activation.*

BA requires persistence and creativity on the part of the therapist and client. It is a basic principle of BA that problems will arise and that troubleshooting possible and actual barriers to activation is essential. Therapists promote activation by anticipating barriers to a client's completing activity assignments, monitoring tasks and troubleshooting when a difficulty has occurred to reduce the likelihood that the same problems will continue in the future.