



# BEHAVIORAL TECH RESEARCH

## What is Behavioral Activation?

*(Client Version)*

### **What is Behavioral Activation treatment?**

Behavioral Activation (BA) is a principle-based behavioral treatment for adults with depression. The main goal of BA is to help people take action in their lives in ways that will help relieve depression and guide them to feeling better and living a rich and rewarding life.

### **Why learn BA?**

- A number of scientific studies have found BA to be an **effective stand-alone treatment for depression**.
- BA is just as successful as cognitive therapy (CT) in treating less severe depression, but more successful than CT in **treating severe depression**.
- BA is **just as effective as medication in relieving depression**, but doesn't carry many of the side effects people experience with medication.

### **How does BA explain depression?**

While many factors contribute to depression, BA emphasizes the strong relationship between events that occur in peoples' lives and the emotions and behaviors that follow. When life becomes less rewarding, many people start to pull away or withdraw from life. Unfortunately, this can initiate a downward spiral. As people feel worse, they withdraw more and are less active and engaged in their lives. As they are less active and engaged with people and activities, they want to do even less, and over time, feelings like sadness or fatigue can grow stronger and more frequent.

Regardless of the specific factors that brought about depression, changing action is the key way out of

depression for many people. Changing behavior is an effective way to change mood and ultimately lessen depression.

### **How does BA target depression?**

First, BA focuses on identifying patterns of behavior that keep people stuck in depression—often, patterns of withdrawing or avoiding. Next, BA aims to reduce these behaviors that trigger or maintain depression by guiding people to create concrete and practical plans. These plans help people to take do-able steps to replace less effective coping with action that will improve mood and create or rebuild a life filled with rewarding experiences.

### **How does BA monitor activity and mood?**

BA therapists help make therapy work by teaming up with clients to track behavior patterns related to depression and to identify behaviors that may be more rewarding. This typically begins with a process known as activity monitoring, which helps to identify the connections between activities and mood. Therapists and clients will then work together to develop step-by-step plans to try new behaviors, a process known as activity structuring. These new behaviors and activities are often completed by clients outside of therapy sessions. During therapy sessions, therapists and clients will then work together to evaluate how much each behavior change lessened depression and to make any necessary changes.

**What is the BA roadmap out of depression?**

- The key to changing how you feel is changing what you do.
- Changes in life can lead to depression, and short-term coping strategies may keep people stuck in depression over time.
- To figure out what activities will reduce depression, pay attention to what happens before and after important behaviors.
- Structure and schedule activities that follow a plan not a mood.
- Change will be easier when starting small.
- Emphasize activities that are naturally rewarding.
- Take a problem-solving, scientific approach to treating depression.

**What is expected from clients during BA?**

BA is not a passive treatment where you just sit and talk about problems. Above all, BA is an action-oriented treatment, which means that the therapist and client work together to increase activity in order to find the path out of depression. Collaboration, or working together, is necessary to the treatment's success. It means that every step taken on this journey is a step taken together, as a team. In particular, clients will:

- Set goals for themselves during therapy
- Keep track of how new behaviors affect mood
- Experiment with new activities and observe their effects
- Keep track of what is working and share this information with the therapist.

**What do individual therapy sessions look like?**

Although treatment is different for each individual person, the general structure of BA is similar across people, and the structure of each therapy session will typically look the same. The BA therapist will begin with a brief mood-related check-in covering the time since the last session. Each session also begins with setting

an agenda to ensure that the most important issues will be addressed and that time is allotted effectively. The session agenda always includes review of homework. New homework is assigned based on reviewing the prior homework and the discussions that occurred during the session.

More generally, at the start of treatment, the primary goal is to learn about behavior patterns. In subsequent sessions, the therapist and client use this understanding of the connection between activity and mood to design experiments that illuminate what's keeping the client stuck in depression and what activities can help them get unstuck. Towards the end of treatment, the structure includes a focus on relapse prevention, such as developing a toolkit to prevent future episodes of depression.

**What's typically involved?**

BA is typically conducted in 10-12 weekly 60-minute sessions. In the present study, treatment will consist of 10 weekly 60-minute sessions.

**Who is appropriate for BA?**

BA is intended for adults with major depressive disorder. It is appropriate for people with mild, moderate, and severe depression.

**Where can I find additional resources?**

- Website of BA Treatment Expert (Dr. Martell): <http://www.christophermartell.com/ba.php>
- Client Workbook:  
Addis, M. & Martell, C. (2004). *Overcoming Depression One Step at a Time: The New Behavioral Activation Approach to Getting Your Life Back*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.