

2

behaviors

BE PROACTIVE

It's counterintuitive, but when you're feeling overwhelmed, bogged down, unable to get out of the pit of feeling bad, taking action is the best medicine. Physical therapists like to say, "Motion is lotion," and this is true for mental health as well. Being active and engaged—even knitting qualifies!—has been shown to improve mood and reduce anxiety.

Is Behavior a Choice?

As we discussed in Chapter 1, in the ARC of emotion, the emotional response (the "R") consists of sensations, feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. We often fail to recognize that much of our behavior is automatic. It's a response to the events of our day, and like our thoughts and beliefs, it's subject to the conditioning that has occurred throughout our lives. For instance, if you hear a bump in the middle of the night, you might awaken with a start and hide under your blankets; nudge your spouse to see what's happening; or grab a bat and go look for yourself. While some of your reaction has a biological or temperamental aspect, it's also

the result of how you've been conditioned. If you've had trauma when you were young, you may feel safer under the blankets. If you've experienced success at taking charge or have been taught that you need to be brave, you may be the one to pick up the bat.

So, yes, behavior is also a choice. When you're sad, you may indeed choose to retreat from loved ones. To a great extent, however, those choices are based on what you have experienced in the past. If retreat has resulted in relief, you will do that. When you reach out to others and they sympathize, you will be more likely to reach out in the future. Ironically, our behaviors don't always provide the results we desire. Have you ever thought that giving someone a "piece of your mind" would feel good and teach them a lesson, only to find that they reacted with anger and you felt ashamed that you harmed a relationship?

As discussed in Chapter 1, Barlow and colleagues, who coined the acronym ARC, refer to the behavioral part of an emotional response as an action urge. The urge is what is often out of our awareness, and automatic; following through to *act* on the urge is usually where choice comes in. Since we take so many actions without really being aware, it can be very helpful to take time to understand how your behaviors serve you. We tend to not consider the consequences of the small actions we take every day.

Why Do We Try to Escape or Avoid Our Feelings?

It's no surprise that we are strongly conditioned to do things that help us avoid pain. Your attempts to escape from pain, the emotional numbing, and the disengagement from activities that once gave you pleasure makes sense.

In Chapter 1, you learned ways to practice having a different relationship with your feelings. You can also gain strategies that lead to a different relationship with automatic behaviors and responses to action urges. Psychologists have several names for this process, including *functional analysis* and *using opposite action*. Here, we call it *acting from the outside in*, as discussed in Chapter 1, and the ABCs.

The ABCs

The ABCs stand for:

- **A:** *Antecedent*, or what comes before an event occurs
- **B:** *Behavior* that you take
- **C:** *Consequence* of the action (behavior) taken

It's easy to understand the ABCs when you reflect on situations in which the consequences were either really bad or really good. For example, if you were rushing in your kitchen while baking a casserole and reached for the hot dish from the oven with your bare hands, only to have burned fingers, you would recognize the consequence of rushing and likely not forget to get a potholder prior to opening the oven door in the future. Alternatively, if you had a very successful karaoke night performance, you would easily make the connection between singing at karaoke and receiving resounding applause. That would stand out as a really good consequence, and you'd be likely to continue going to karaoke night. Those situations are memorable. You realized the consequence was something you don't want to happen again, and you told yourself, "I'll never do that again." Or, on the opposite side, you may have thought, "More please!" when your behavior resulted in getting you something wonderful.

But there are daily consequences, little things, that influence our moods that we don't really think about. In fact, they not only get overlooked by ourselves, they get overlooked by others, sometimes even by mental health providers. And yet, it's the everyday actions we take, over and over, day after day, without awareness, that contribute to our mood state far more often than big events.

Over the years, I have consulted with therapists doing research on behavioral activation (BA) as a treatment for depression and anxiety. I've concluded from these studies that recognizing the consequences of daily activities is a key to living well. And the simple attention to the ABCs helped some participants to act more consistently with their values and to engage in meaningful activities—two pathways to a fulfilling, satisfying life.^{1,2}

Nearly all of the strategies offered in this chapter call on some aspect of the ABCs. As you read about what you can do differently in common daily scenarios, think about how you're using the ABCs as a lens to help you become more aware of automatic behaviors, and take mindful actions that support your well-being.

Acting from the Outside In

When you're depressed, you act in the best way that you can to feel better. The problem is that when your goal is to escape from the feelings (or lack of feeling) associated with depression, you can act in ways that pull you away from your true values. When you begin to recognize that the outcome of your behavior (the *consequence* in the ABCs) is to escape or avoid a negative emotional experience, you have a clue that you may be acting from the "inside out." You are being controlled by your feelings. This is natural, we all do it; recognizing it is not an invitation to self-blame! From the perspective of behavioral psychologists, when behavior is controlled by its consequences, all behavior makes sense.

Acting from the outside in allows you to take steps toward what's meaningful, even if it doesn't give you an emotional sensation of pleasure or enjoyment. You need to keep acting from the outside until it gets *in*—until there is enjoyment or until you're living in a more consistent way with what you value, even if you still feel depressed. It's unrealistic to think that you can just white-knuckle your way through rough times. By acting in a way consistent with your values and goals, you can experience tiny successes at achieving what you set out to do, even very small things.

For instance, I don't always feel like sitting down to write, and writing doesn't always come easily to me. But I believe this book is important, and writing about BA and other ways to help people through depression is consistent with my values. However, many other things pull at me. So, I play with the dog or binge on a television series—I act from the inside out, from what I feel like doing. When I write even one paragraph, however, it moves me toward a goal—I'm acting from the outside in, from my plan. Yes, the writing is a struggle, but I do it

anyway. Over time, I get more words on the page, and the ideas slowly begin to flow, and it's less of a struggle. The action has changed the feeling, and motivation to write has followed the action of writing.

Acting As If

Acting as if is a scripted technique that can slowly provide some relief from deep misery. We touched on this concept briefly in Chapter 1. The main idea is to use your power of choice to act in a way that will serve several purposes. With acting as if, you might simply be able to get through a difficult moment, or you may actually end up with a shift in your mood. Acting as if allows you to hold the feeling you have, but to define what needs to be done in ways that follow values-driven behaviors. Admittedly, it will feel like “going through the motions” at first. However, you can think of outside in as representing the direction, with the outcome being that your actions will, over time, change your mood.

Let's take a few moments to play around with the idea of acting as if. The objective is to act, or to be an actor. In method acting, actors immerse themselves in the roles of the characters they are playing. They rely on sensation memories from their own lives to bring up emotions naturally to give a realistic performance. They aren't faking, but they are indeed playing a role. In the same way, we need to be ourselves, but act from a different mood, doing things differently than our current feelings may seem to dictate. So, let's give acting as if a try:

- **What parts of the activity are you going to do?** Identify a task that you do by rote, perhaps getting dressed in the morning. Break it down. You may start with choosing the pieces of your outfit. Then you might need to match accessories, like a belt, so pick out those too. Then you might put on your trousers one leg at a time. Then you'll put on the other pieces. The point is that activities that we do daily become automatic, and to act as if, we need to think about the various parts of even the most rote activities.

- **What would your body be doing if you were feeling sad?** Turn on a piece of music that is evocative for you and that can

sometimes make you feel sad. Sit in a chair with your shoulders down, feet stretched out in front of you, and just let yourself slump down. Put your head down as if your neck can't even hold the weight. Frown. Perhaps close, or mostly close your eyes. If your eyes are open, just stare at a spot on the floor until your vision loses focus. How do you feel? I presume you feel a little blue. While listening to this music, you have just acted as if you were sad and blue, and it may have evoked that feeling. It may have been easy for you to evoke that feeling if you have been depressed of late. This sets up the next step: acting as if you are not blue.

• **What would your body be doing if you were feeling . . . different?** Keep the same music playing and sit up straight in your chair. Lift your head and either look forward or turn from side to side. Open your eyes and lift your eyebrows slightly. Don't exaggerate, but do elevate them a little. If you're near a window, look outside and find shimmering leaves, a passerby, or cars moving along. If you aren't near a window, just look around the room. Raise the corners of your mouth, again just slightly. You don't have to put on a big smile (that would be faking and possibly a little creepy). Keep your shoulders high.

Now, how do you feel? At this point, I assume you might feel a little different, maybe a little silly, which is just fine. But I presume you don't feel the pull of the gloom from the sad music as much as you did when you were slumped in the chair with your body and muscles telling you that what you are experiencing is misery. The point is that simply changing your body posture can change how you feel. This is likely why there is evidence to suggest that injections of Botox can improve depression. Presumably this is because Botox does things like lift the eyebrows as it tightens the skin, a facial movement we associate with feeling engaged and upbeat. You can act as if for any feeling—whether it's happy, confident, brave, or anything else.

• **How would you talk to others?** Finally, you may notice that when you're depressed you tend to speak in monotone and sometimes mumble. Speak up. Take a deep breath from your belly to give your voice some power. Articulate your words. Imagine someone in the back of a large auditorium who needs to hear you without a microphone. You don't need to shout, but just speak clearly, as if you were a confident public speaker. You can also imagine a script for an actor

written to provide a certain mood. Does the script for someone who is not depressed include talking only about struggles, hurts, indignities? Probably not. The script is probably also not all about marvelously fun and cheerful things with sugary platitudes about how wonderful the world is. A realistic script would evoke what people normally talk about. Tell someone you like a particular color they are wearing, or make a statement about the weather, or about something unusual that you notice. Realistic scripts may be more neutral than positive, and that is fine. You don't need to fake being upbeat, just act as if you aren't sad, anxious, angry, or whatever emotion is strong and likely to get you stuck acting from the inside out.

Silas's Story

Like me, Silas had worked throughout his professional life as a therapist helping clients living with depression and anxiety. Also like me, he could empathize but had never felt the depth of depression himself. Then he had a major medical event that required surgery. He woke up in the recovery room after having a traumatic experience with only a shadow memory of being hoisted in a sling and put to bed while in great pain. Lying in his bed, he felt utter despair. There was no pain in his body, there were no thoughts of a bleak future, there was just trauma, and deep gloom that left him wanting nothing but to be dead. There were no feelings to flee; there was, in his words, "just nothing but utter hopelessness." Silas was not a man who had ever considered taking his life, but at that moment all he yearned for was to cease to exist.

Silas lay in this state for several days. The nursing staff urged him to get out of bed, to stand up. He didn't care; it meant nothing to him. Then he awoke one morning, as he described it, "with Christopher in my head." He had been discussing behavioral activation with me for many years, so he knew what to do. He told himself to get up and walk; he did a half lap around the nurses' station, just as the nurses had been telling him to for days. He acted from the outside in. He followed what was consistent with a goal of healing, although at that moment he had no motivation to heal. He knew that the despair was pulling him deeper and that he had a choice to let it continue to pull

him down or do what he and I had talked about, had helped others to do, and knew was difficult but necessary: He took that first small step.

Changing Your Relationship to Your Actions

Below are some common statements that I've heard over many years of working with people who live with depression. Some have felt the kind of despair described by my friend Silas. For them, this was the state of their lives, and it was exhausting, but they didn't care enough to do much about it—although coming to therapy was a step in the right direction. When you have similar feelings and taking action feels impossible, try some of the techniques here.

“When I feel blue, I don't want to do anything but scroll through my phone.”

Depression can be a state of inertia. The action urge is to do nothing at all. Engaging in a mindless activity like aimlessly scrolling through your phone—or even just sitting and staring at nothing—can have a strong pull. As an antidote, you don't need to feel motivated, you don't need to care, you just need to act.

PLAN A GO-TO ACTIVITY AHEAD OF TIME

Planning activities in advance is a very helpful solution. The key is to do this when you're not in a state of inertia. Then, when you're feeling stuck, you don't have to think about what to do, you've practiced ahead of time. When you haven't been motivated to do anything for some time, the place to start is with some very simple activities that you can decide to do and that will be successful.

1. Use an activity log to schedule one activity over the next week.
2. Schedule things that bring you a sense of pleasure, are values-

guided, or just get you moving, such as walking into a different room and stretching your arms toward the ceiling.

3. Take the first step. A second is likely to follow. Keep in mind that if you had broken your leg, you would not start rehabilitation by jogging on a treadmill; rather, you'd probably start with a few very simple knee-bend exercises. Whatever your equivalent of a knee bend is, start there. Once you've done that, you will have acted on a plan—and that is success.

KEEP AN ACTIVITY-MOOD CHART

Going back to the ABCs, one consequence (C) of behavior (B) that you can begin to notice is your mood. By paying attention, you can gain a clearer understanding of how your behaviors relate to, and even shape, your mood. You can also begin to see how closely your life now aligns with the kind of life you value.

Start by completing an Activity-Mood Chart on the facing page. You may use the one provided (extra charts may be downloaded from www.guilford.com/martell3-materials). Write down what you were doing in hourly increments. Include the activity, and with whom you did it. Also write your predominant feeling during that hour of the day.

If pausing to write down every hour of the day feels overwhelming, break the day into four-hour chunks, as in the shaded area. Then write at least three times a day: morning, midday, and evening. Recall the previous three or four hours and note what you were doing and how you were feeling. The more often you can track your hours, the more data you will gather. But writing just three or four times a day is better than nothing.

When you keep a log of your activities, you might be surprised to see how much your moods change during the day and how related they are to what you're doing. You might also discover that you have consistent patterns you hadn't noticed before.

“Everything feels tedious.”

Life can become routine for anyone. Routines are good for us, and can be comforting—but when routine becomes boring, or when

ACTIVITY-MOOD CHART

Time	Activity (what and with whom)	Feeling
12 A.M.		
1 A.M.		
2 A.M.		
3 A.M.		
4 A.M.		
5 A.M.		
6 A.M.		
7 A.M.		
8 A.M.		
9 A.M.		
10 A.M.		
11 A.M.		
12 P.M.		
1 P.M.		
2 P.M.		
3 P.M.		
4 P.M.		
5 P.M.		
6 P.M.		
7 P.M.		
8 P.M.		
9 P.M.		
10 P.M.		
11 P.M.		

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depression steals your interest in everyday activities, it can become difficult to keep moving forward. Starting small, you can add some new activities to your schedule that can shift your routine.

You might be thinking, “But everything is tedious! What’s the point?” The point is that when you’re in a rut, small changes to your routine can, over time, make a difference.

Sometimes there are necessary tasks that you simply can’t find the motivation for, because they seem boring. Boredom is an indication that you’re not fully engaging in life; getting out of that avoidance trap and doing the task may be a good first step. Here is one way to do that:

LIST A SERIES OF SMALL STEPS

1. Make a plan for taking small steps.
2. Rate how difficult each step can be.
3. Decide in advance whether you will start with one or two of the steps.
4. Decide in advance whether you’ll do the hardest or the easiest task first.

Doing the hardest task first might give you a sense of accomplishment and then make all of the following steps seem much easier. Doing the easiest task first can get you started and earn you an initial success—and might be the only way you can do anything at all.

ENHANCE THE ACTIVITY

You’ve probably heard of “enhanced” water—which is really plain old water with some extra minerals or flavoring, so it’s ostensibly more enjoyable. Bring this approach to tedious activities. For instance, consider acting as if you were enjoying the activity, or competent at it. Or add something pleasurable, like your favorite music playing in the background. If the task can be done in public, take it to a park or coffee shop. Invite a friend to join you with something they need to get done. This may sound strange, but we join with others for book clubs and knitting circles—why not ask someone to join you in a “let’s get one project done” afternoon?

“Doing anything seems overwhelming.”

This is extremely common when you're depressed. Many life situations are genuinely overwhelming. Financial concerns, illness, interpersonal problems, employment troubles, or housing issues all can overwhelm. The bar for what feels overwhelming gets lower when you're depressed. Take the example of cleaning a sink and counters full of dirty dishes. You might start by simply putting greasy pans in dishwater to soak. Ah, but now that they've soaked, you might as well just wash them. And now that the dishwater is dirty, how about draining it? But then you've got an empty sink—may as well add clean, hot dishwater so you can wash glasses . . . and then silverware.

Wait! This all seems very practical, but what if it still winds up being overwhelming? If you succeed with step one, there is nothing wrong with doing the other steps. But—and here's the takeaway—it *can be unhelpful to think that every time you start something you need to do it all*. Because if you can't allow yourself to stop at step one or two, every task and every situation will feel big and continue to overwhelm you.

Here's an old saying: “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.” With apologies to our pachyderm friends, there is wisdom here: What initially seems impossible only gets done in incremental steps.

BREAK THINGS DOWN

1. Set the goal of doing just parts of the task.
2. Then, break the task down into five or six small steps.
3. Break down those steps into even smaller steps.
4. Remember, your goal is not to complete the entire task, but to start with just one or two steps and allow yourself to stop there. (If you continue, that's okay, but the point here is to reduce overwhelm with fewer steps, not maintain overwhelm by doing it all.)
5. Make a plan for each of the future steps, and schedule times to do them.

PRACTICE DOING ONE THING MINDFULLY

Another way to manage tasks that are tedious or overwhelming is to do a small task mindfully. This means focusing your attention on all

aspects of the task. Notice what you see, smell, feel, and hear. Keep bringing your attention back to those things when your mind wanders. Take your time. The goal is not completion—the goal is mindful attention.

You might be doing something as simple as making the bed. Notice the feeling of the air rushing through when you fluff the sheets. Inhale the scent. Notice the difference in the feel of the sheet and the bedspread . . . the thickness and textures. Listen attentively to the sounds of the fabrics as you arrange them. Smooth out wrinkles. Doing this mundane task mindfully may engage you in a way you haven't experienced before, and offer a break from hectic demands. You may turn something routine—something you usually just get out of the way on autopilot—into a moment that feels fresh.

"I'm busy all the time. How can I do more?"

You might think that doing a task mindfully is just a waste of time. Or that activation sounds dreadful because you already have too much to do. If you've had those thoughts, you are not alone. Depressed people don't always just sit around staring at walls. You may be too busy, have too many demands, and work all the time, yet you're still depressed. A few suggestions can help if this is your situation.

SET PRIORITIES

We can get pulled into doing things that don't make us happy or provide the fulfillment we expected. This is when it's worth pausing to ask whether what keeps us so busy is actually consistent with our values. Work may be extremely demanding, or you may have a lot to do to keep your children in school and fed. Regardless of your situation, you need to prioritize the things that need to be done.

Airplane safety instructions tell us to put on our own oxygen mask before helping others. That is a set priority. So, you might start there. What do you need to do to keep yourself healthy enough to actually complete your tasks? Your own physical and mental health may need to be your first priority. This might mean giving up some of your

other responsibilities. You set priorities by asking what is consistent with your values.

EVALUATE THE CONSEQUENCES OF YOUR BEHAVIOR

You can use the ABCs from earlier in this chapter to look at the consequences of your behavior. Doing so can help you gain insight into how closely you're living in accordance with your values. Let's look at one example:

- **A:** *Antecedent:* Bills come in the mail.
- **B:** *Behavior:* I stack the bills in a pile to pay later.
- **C:** *Consequence:* I feel immediate relief that I don't have to stop and handle them right away, and I turn my attention to preparing a meal . . . but I do feel some guilt because they're important . . . and sometimes I don't pay the bills for a month or two, and then I have to pay late fees.

Is the consequence in accordance with this person's values? Immediately yes, if this person values family bonding and prioritizes dinner with loved ones over sitting down to pay bills. But if bills go unpaid too long, late fees apply, and this conflicts with this person's value of fiscal responsibility. Looking at the ABCs, this person might conclude stacking bills is fine—but only for a week or two.

Choose several tasks in your life, apply the ABCs, and identify whether adjustments are needed so that you're acting in accordance with your values.

"I don't even want to get out of bed in the morning!"

All of the suggestions in this book so far may simply feel like too much. You may have tried many things and still live with depression. You may feel numb. I understand! That is why the activities in this book are designed to help you develop the habit of living according to a plan rather than a mood or feeling. The kind of activity is less

important than the decision to take small steps toward breaking the grip of the mood.

START WITH YOUR FEET ON THE FLOOR

Your bed may feel like a place of safety; you pull the covers over your head and avoid facing the day. Or you may be having thoughts like, “I’m letting everyone down,” “I’m lazy and useless,” and on and on. Let those thought bubbles float away for now. Concentrate on just one goal, one demand: Put your feet on the floor.

1. Set an alarm for any time of the day that you think is realistic. No judgment. Could be 7 A.M. or 1 P.M.
2. When that alarm rings, sit up, swing your body around, and place your feet on the floor.
3. Stay sitting up for at least one to five minutes.
4. Congratulate yourself because you have met your goal!

Do this every day. Whatever else you may end up doing that day is a bonus. If you do nothing else, that’s okay, because, for now, you have met the goal. You’ve broken the habit of drowning in a mood and surfaced for some fresh air for a few seconds.

PLAN SIMPLE MORNING ACTIVITIES

You won’t be living well if you only put your feet on the floor for an extended period of time, though. It will be important to begin engaging in life. Start small. Go from sitting to standing. From standing to walking, and so forth. Simple morning routines can be accomplished whether you are rich or poor, whether you are physically able to do them on your own or need some assistance. Here is a list of things to consider doing. Start with one or two and add more as you go:

- Open the blinds
- Splash water on your face

- Wash your face thoroughly
- Get a drink of water
- Fix a cup of coffee or tea
- Eat a banana or a bowl of cereal
- Comb or brush your hair
- Shave if you need to
- Take a shower

Over time, you will be out of your bed, getting ready in the morning and doing simple things to face the day. Even in the darkest times, you can do something very small. Have empathy for yourself. Even in deep suffering, take charge of something small that moves you toward living well.

Living Well

- You can change how you feel by changing what you do.
- You can even change how things work in your brain by adjusting your actions and thoughts.
- You can become and stay engaged in your life, which will keep your depression manageable.
- It makes perfect sense to disengage when you're depressed. But this disengagement reinforces itself like a habit. Fortunately, you can break the habit by taking small steps to act according to what you value and the goals you set, and not according to the mood that's pulling you down.