

Behavioral Activation Modules (6 sessions)

Module 1: What is Behavioral ActivationPAGE 2

Module 2: Finding enjoyment and mastery 3

Module 3: What is the function of your avoidance 4

Module 4: Identifying TRAPs and getting on TRAC 6

Module 5: Using self control to manage unhealthy rewards..... 7

Module 6: Reduce your exposure to aversive situations..... 8

Extra materials

BA Summary 9

Link between stress and depression10

Title: What is Behavioral Activation? BA Lesson 1 of 6

Summary: Behavioral Activation is an effective way to reverse depression.

Overview

Understanding your symptoms of depression and the basis of Behavioral Activation will help you recover from depression.

What is Depression

Depression is a mental health condition affects one in five people in their lifetime. Women are twice as likely to show depression relative to men, though both experience the same symptoms and benefit from the same treatments. About two in five people will have depression before age 18 years old and they may suffer depression repeatedly.

Science shows that depression occurs when genetic, biologic and psychologic factors interact with stressful events to affect our brain. Repeated stress leads to the loss of connections between brain cells between the memory area of our brain (hippocampus) and other brain regions. The loss of connection affects how well our brain can manage mood, sleep, appetite, behavior, and decisions. Depression is not due to a chemical (serotonin) imbalance, nor a spiritual or personality problem. It is a medical condition that generally requires treatment.

Depression is diagnosed if a person reports a depressed, empty, or flat mood and/or a loss of their usual interest in activities consistently for two weeks. Also, a person with depression will report daily problems with three or more of symptoms below. Culture and social situations can influence a person's experience of illness, so other symptoms may emerge. We recommend that you use our depression measure to track your emotional well-being. At present, there is no genetic test for depression, nor a brain scan that can be done to diagnose depression. The most useful way to assess depression is to use a standard test to review these symptoms and consult with a clinician to confirm:

- Depressed, flat or empty mood
- Lack of usual interest or pleasure
- Weight loss/gain unrelated to dieting
- Insomnia/hypersomnia (hard time sleeping or oversleeping)
- Psychomotor retardation or agitation (moving your body very slowly or quickly)
- Fatigue (tiredness) or loss of energy
- Feelings of worthlessness/guilt
- Diminished ability to concentrate
- Recurrent thoughts of death
- Other symptoms: irritability, anger, pain, and tension

Science shows that talk therapy, antidepressants, exercise, and bright light therapy increase natural brain chemicals, called growth factors, which help brain connections to grow and connect parts of the brain. This growth factor, called neurotrophic brain-derived neurotropic factor (BDNF), helps the brain to make changes that reduce depression. Working on your healthy lifestyle habits, such as diet, exercise, and sleep, as well as therapy and meditation are generally the first treatments to do before starting an antidepressant. BDNF supplements are unhelpful.

By understanding your depression and starting talk therapy, you can rebuild your brain circuits, particularly when you practice new skills in situations that matter to you. Other approaches, which include ketamine, transcranial magnetic stimulation, and psychedelic therapy, should be supervised by an expert as they are used for people who don't respond to traditional approaches. Click below to learn more about depression and treatment approaches:

What is depression? <https://medlineplus.gov/depression.html>

What is talk therapy? <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/psychotherapies>

What are mood disorders? <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health>

What about alternative medicine approaches for depression?

<https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/providers/digest/depression-and-complementary-health-approaches-science>

Behavioral Activation is an Effective Talk Therapy

The Behavioral Activation program (BA) is a six-part program that teaches you how to recover from depression. With depression, you may have stopped your healthy routines. As a result, your avoidance of balanced routines can make your depressed mood worse as you can lose the chance to feel enjoyment and skills. BA will teach you how to find more rewarding experiences and to reduce your avoidance.

Given how well BA works and what we present in these lessons, you can have a strong expectation that this approach will help you recover from depression. Part of your recovery will depend on how you use the BA lessons. Also, your recovery will depend on the effects of the attention and thoughtful care that you get from our care manager with this approach. Communication with the care manager is an important part of your health care as we want to fit the BA program to your needs. Together, you and your care manager will be able to trust that the BA approach will help you feel better.

This BA program was developed at the University of Washington in Seattle and at Northwestern Medicine. For a copy of this approach and information about BA classes online or in person, click:

<https://www.feinberg.northwestern.edu/sites/asher-center/patient-care/index.html>

BA Will Use Two Key Components to Decrease Depression

1. You will learn to **create healthy and balanced daily routines that promote a sense of mastery and enjoyment**. We will ask you to find out which of your daily actions decrease your depression. Learning to track your activities across the day - and the effect of these activities on your mood - is a powerful way to change depression. We will teach you how to set 'goals of enjoyment and mastery' to boost reward patterns. Reward patterns are sets of behaviors that feel good to do and that you are likely to try again.
2. You will **learn to notice which avoidance patterns create depressed mood**. Avoidance is a common way to cope with a depressed mood, even though it creates problems. We will teach you how to use avoidance when it optimizes your recovery. Practice of this approach will strengthen the connections in your brain to make it easier for your brain to work normally.

Two Main Ways to Reduce Your Depression

Increase your ability to predict, use and remember rewards

- Understand what creates depression
- Measure your symptoms using our depression scale
- Track daily mood, where you are and what you are doing
- Add daily enjoyable activities
- Figure out which rewards lift your mood
- Goals of enjoyment and mastery
- Learn to stick to your goals when emotions are strong

Limit avoidance when coping with depression and use it when it keeps you safe

- Track your avoidance
- Find Emotional TRAPS
- Get on TRAC
- How does avoidance help
- Rumination is avoidance, move around when it happens
- Avoid depressing situations when appropriate

Is Behavioral Activation Right for Me?

Look at the following scale: <https://www.apa.org/depression-guideline/patient-health-questionnaire.pdf>
If your depression score is nine or less, then focus on stress reduction with our SMART lessons. If your depression score is ten or higher, focus on BA lessons.

Click here for a video on BA: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBVActJCN3M>

Starting Behavioral Activation

Start looking at your daily routines to see what actions and situations create depression. What are the daily situations that make you feel depressed? Are they chronic hassles or larger issues? If you can reduce the stress of those situations - even a little - your symptoms will improve.

Track Daily Mood and Situations

When depressed, we show less ability to predict, feel, and remember reward. As a result, you may have stopped your healthy routines. If you track your rewarding experiences, you can boost your brain's ability to predict, feel and remember how to find enjoyable and realistic activities.

Instructions for the Enjoyment and Mastery Exercise

Reflect on the small and meaningful activities that gave you a sense of enjoyment before you became depressed. Enjoyment is the experience of joy or pleasure or delight. How about mastery or a skill or knowledge that helps you to control your situation? Both enjoyment and mastery turn on the reward circuits in your brain and you will get better at predicting and remembering reward.

Step 1. Click here to view a list of pleasant events. This measure will help you assess how often you tried pleasant events: [Pleasant Events Schedule \(healthnetsolutions.com\)](http://healthnetsolutions.com)

Step 2. What is your favorite food, music, activity, setting, car, person, animal, etc. How much time do you spend with this favorite person/animal/object/activity? Why is it rewarding to you?

Step 3. Now look at your plans for today. Is your favorite experience/person/animal on your schedule? Does it involve music, play, social time, or rest? We want to see if your mood shifts depending on what you are doing. Look for small positive uplifts in your depressed mood.

Putting It Together

At the end of your day, reflect on life changes you can make. Could you change a few simple situations when you feel low enjoyment. Keep the situations when your ratings are high? Keep going this week to build a daily routine with higher reward.

Step 1. Ask yourself three questions to shift your mood.

- (1) How intense is my depression now and how is this linked to my situation?
- (2) What is your enjoyment or mastery level?
- (3) How can I boost my enjoyment or mastery in a small way to improve my mood?

Here is an example:

- (1) How intense is my depression now and how is this linked to my situation? *I feel very sad while struggling to feed my baby with a bottle.*
- (2) What is your enjoyment or mastery level? *Feeling no enjoyment, I am struggling.*
- (3) How can I boost my enjoyment or mastery in a small way to improve my mood? *I could play some soft music and remember the better times. This will probably get better with practice.*

Title: Scheduling goals of enjoyment and mastery. BA Lesson 2 of 6

Summary: Increasing enjoyment and mastery

Overview

Depression affects our routines. We start this module with a new concept of seeking enjoyable activities five minutes each day. Then, we will teach you ways to build goals of enjoyment and mastery.

Awareness of Enjoyment

When we feel depressed, our habits and routines may not feel as good as before. What was once initially rewarding, now seems bland or not worth doing. As a result, we stop trying new and enjoyable activities. This can extend a depressed mood.

Seeking Healthy Rewards Five Minutes at a Time

Each day, add a short (five minute) naturally rewarding experience. Examples of natural rewards involve sitting in the sun, breathing fresh air, laughing at a joke, sending a text to someone to feel connected, playing music. We call these “natural” rewards as you don’t have to buy them. You will note that small moments of reward are not enough to improve your depression. Don’t worry if the activities are not as enjoyable as before (if at all). Just keep practicing small moments of enjoyment and mastery to show yourself that it is possible. Your brain is tracking and will use this information.

After practicing this strategy for a week, you may automatically seek out more enjoyable activities (e.g., remember to keep it small, simple, and free). This means that your brain has started to pay attention and it is remembering that those activities work for you. Keep seeking enjoyment as your brain is remodeling. If you cannot, reach out to your care manager for support.

Keep Exploring Even When You Don’t Feel Like It

Not all enjoyable situations can last (e.g., sunny weather changes). Keep exploring newer healthy activities that make you feel in control even when you may not feel like it. This may feel like a push. Sometimes, you may have to **act as if you are doing this for someone else who you care about** if you cannot do it for yourself. Can you see how “acting as if” might help you to stay focused on your goals? It may initially feel unpleasant, but the benefits of your actions will shift how your brain works. If you do not feel like doing this, wait ten minutes and revisit your idea.

Building Goals of Enjoyment and Mastery

Step 1. We all have goals in life. When you are taking care of a baby, it can seem difficult to focus on yourself. Find a simple ten-minute enjoyable activity that aligns with your short-term goals. For example, you want to become physically stronger, walking may seem like a chore. But if you added a podcast or music, the ten-minute walk will be easier to do.

Here is a list of ten-minute activities called **Goals of Enjoyment and Mastery**, or GEMS. Pick one for this week.
<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-e&q=scheduling+pleasant+events>

Examples:

What is your parenting goal? *I want to be an attentive parent.*

What enjoyable activities could you do for ten minutes each day to be the parent you want to be? *I could talk softly to my baby while I am changing him.*

What is your physical recovery goal? *I want to improve physical strength.*

What enjoyable activities could you do for ten minutes each day to improve your recovery? *I could make sure I move as appropriate.*

What is your relationship goal? *I want to talk with other people about parenting.*

What enjoyable activities could you do for ten minutes each day to build this friendship? *I could check out websites that help mothers and fathers with newborn children.*

What is your personal goal? *I want to coordinate childcare with my partner.*

What enjoyable activity could you do for ten minutes to reach this goal? *I will ask them when I can take the baby for ten minutes, so that they can rest, take a shower, etc.*

What is your emotional health goal? *I want to make sure I track my depression and anxiety.*

What enjoyable activities could you do for ten minutes to improve your emotional health? *I could reach out to the care coordinator to get ideas about how to build goals of enjoyment and mastery.*

Use the above examples to try your own. If you need other ideas, look at your educational or training goals, career goals, hobbies, recreation, spiritual and community goals.

Title: What is the function of avoidance? BA Lesson 3 of 6

Summary: Reducing avoidance and procrastination improves depression.

Overview

Depression can lead to avoidance and procrastination. We start this module with a new avoidance-awareness strategy designed to change your unhelpful avoidance patterns that are linked with depression.

What is Avoidance?

We all use avoidance to cope with stress. It happens automatically to protect us from uncertain or unsafe situations. When depressed, we tend to believe that avoidance is useful as it can make us feel better. This is unhelpful as avoidance is responding to your mood and not your goals. Unhelpful avoidance patterns interfere with your normal coping and mood and create stress pileups.

Avoidance Awareness

Understanding the difference between helpful and unhelpful avoidance will help you regulate its use. Reflect on where and when you were avoiding situations today. Did it help you? Make things worse? Pause and think about the ways that you avoid your goals because of your mood and how you can change it. Click here to learn about avoidance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-ZugexyULM>

Practice 1: This Awareness Exercise Can Reduce your Unhelpful Avoidance

Memorize these four questions to reduce avoidance.

What am I avoiding?
I avoid when I feel ...
Is this avoidance helpful or unhelpful?
I can change my unhelpful avoidance by....

Examples:

What am I avoiding? *I need to exercise and instead I am on social media (13 hours last week!)*
I avoid when I feel... *I am sad or don't feel like exercising*
Is this avoidance helpful or unhelpful? *the avoidance is not helpful.*
I can change my unhelpful avoidance by.... *pair social media with exercise. Look at it when I am on the treadmill.*

What am I avoiding? *I don't want to call people back*
I avoid when I feel... *I cannot cope with my depression*
Is this avoidance helpful or unhelpful? *Avoidance helps me wait it out to feel better, but then I don't have friends*
I can change my avoidance by.... *reach out to talk with care coordinator, trusted person.*

What do I need to do but I am avoiding? *avoid looking at my finances*
I avoid when I feel... *worried, this situation will be expensive and I don't know what to do*
Is this avoidance helpful or unhelpful? *It is unhelpful as I could owe money*
I can change my avoidance by.... *asking someone to help me budget*

We encourage you to talk with your partner, friend, or person who is helping you care for your baby, to build awareness of your unhelpful avoidance. Avoidance can be both helpful and unhelpful. Seeing both sides can help you change avoidance.

Summary: Using direct coping to reduce depression

Overview

Active coping means changing your unhelpful avoidance patterns. We introduce a guided approach to reducing avoidance so you can reach your goals. Reducing unhelpful avoidance will recover from depression. The more you do this the stronger your brain circuits will become.

Practice 1. What is an Unhelpful Avoidance Pattern?

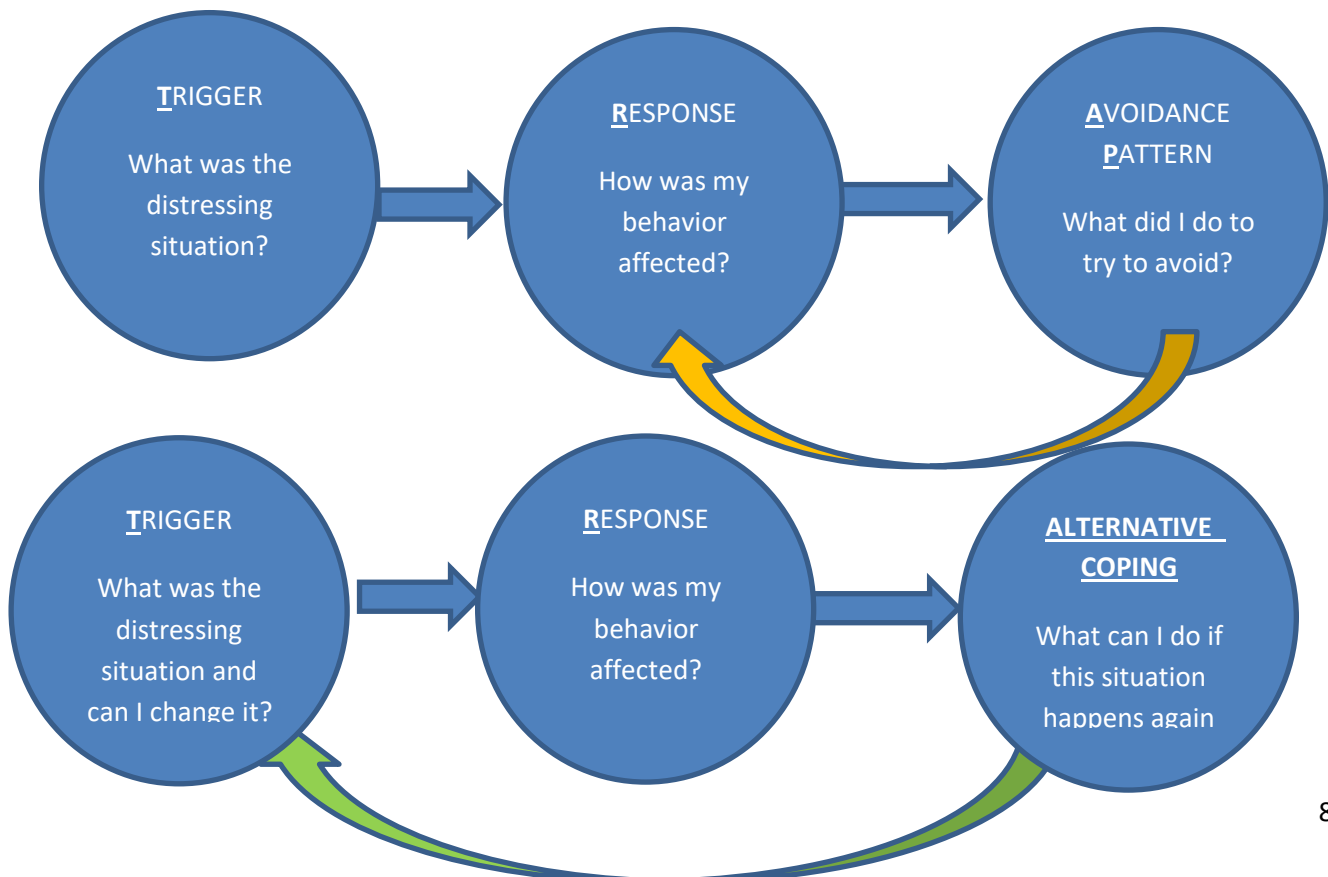
We all get stuck in unhelpful avoidance patterns: they may be physical, cognitive, emotional, or somatic. Use this simple five-minute exercise to modify unhelpful avoidance. Say, for example, you have noticed that you are using social media to feel less depressed, but it interferes with your sleep. Try these questions to limit your avoidance:

What am I avoiding or doing too much of? *using social media when I should be sleeping*
Is this avoidance helpful or unhelpful? *it is unhelpful as I am tired*
I can change my unhelpful avoidance by... *setting a timer or removing the social media app for two days.*

Practice 2: What Starts this Pattern?

Understanding what started your avoidance will deepen your skills to limit avoidance. The first step is to become aware of situations that make you feel depressed. Look at the Ttrigger circle (below), and ask yourself: what is the situation that has makes me depressed? The second step is to look at the Response circle, and ask yourself: What are my emotional reactions to this situation?

Your brain and body may quickly try to shut down the emotions by using avoidance. This happens quickly and we tend to think that avoidance is useful as it turns off the emotions that we feel. Most of the time, however, avoidance cannot make some situations go away. Notice in this graphic, that the Avoidance Pattern will not turn off the Ttrigger'. As a result, the situation will repeat itself, creating a spiral of chronic avoidance. Reflect on what you can do to actively cope with the situation directly, and you will have reduced your stress and emotions.



Title: Using self-control. BA Lesson 5 of 6

Summary: Using self-control to limit your use of unhealthy rewards.

Overview

Resisting impulse behaviors with self-control is a key skill to recover from depression. It is also a good way to maintain a healthy and balanced lifestyle to prevent depression recurrence. Next, we offer a new strategy that will help you to decide when to lessen your heavy use of food, substances, social media, and alcohol to cope with your depression.

Awareness of Healthy Versus Unhealthy Enjoyment

Seeking enjoyment is important for our emotional health, though not every enjoyable activity is healthy for our mind or body. It is common that we will use food, alcohol, social media, and substances to manage our mood, but we can overdo it. Heavy use of social media is associated with impaired decision making, as is the overuse of alcohol and substances. When you know how and when to regulate your use of enjoyable activities, your depression will improve. Awareness of when your attention is being snared and your enjoyable activities no longer offer mood boosting effects is when you can consider stopping. Also, you could ask yourself whether there is an alternative time to seek enjoyment that keeps you healthy and active.

To improve your management of diet, alcohol, sleep, exercise, and social media, check out tips from:

[Counseling Postpartum Patients About Diet and Exercise 2023\(Updated\) \(arhp.org\)](#)

[Alcohol's Effects on Health | National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism \(NIAAA\) \(nih.gov\)](#)

[ACOG committee opinion. Exercise during pregnancy and the postpartum period. Number 267, January 2002. American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)

<https://www.thensf.org/>

[Social Media and Mental Health - HelpGuide.org](#)

Practice 1. Building Self-Control with Unhealthy Rewards

To keep a healthy mood, we tend to prefer having rewards happen as soon as possible. These immediate rewards to keep us comfortable. As a result, we may discount (or reduce) the value of healthy rewards that are planned for tomorrow. This protective feature in our brain is called delayed discounting. It means that we lower the value of a delayed reward relative to an immediate one. One way to handle this is to pause for five seconds and look at what is driving you to put off the bigger more rewarding experiences. Think about the real value of your goals set for tomorrow relative to the distractions you may have today. This can increase your self-control to make helpful decisions.

Holding off from excessive pleasurable experiences is a psychological effort. This strategy requires trial and error learning, and you can use some of these questions to build self-control. Might holding off on excessive pleasure seeking improve your work performance, might it give you a new perspective, or help you achieve a personal goal? Might distraction or getting out of the situation also help you to slow down and stop? When you pause, your brain will have enough time to launch control that stops you from unhealthy habits.

You can strengthen your ability to control when you take time to learn and practice and to reduce stress.

Click on here for more information: <https://www.apa.org/topics/personality/willpower>

Summary: Reduce your exposure to adversity.

Overview

We aim to help you focus on reducing the time that you spend think about your depression and being in depressing situations. We will help you to be aware of *when* you start having gloomy thoughts and show you *how* to view these thoughts as a signal to start moving. Then, we switch gears to show you how avoidance of unsafe situations will also help you to recover from your depression.

Rumination Awareness

Simple goals offer direction and purpose, though background thoughts and feelings may interfere with them. Rumination is a form of intense thinking usually focused on negative aspects of your life. Your brain may feel stuck in your thoughts, worrying about past situations, focus on 'errors' that have occurred in our past. As a result, you may start searching for an answer only to find none that satisfy, and before you know it, you may feel depressed. There are strategies to control rumination.

Practice 1: Rumination Signals Action

Rumination is a signal. As soon as you recognize that you have slipped into rumination, take that as a signal to do something. Ask yourself "What can I do to cope with this?". This will help you to distract from rumination, changing the focus on your generalized thoughts to specific actions. This will encourage you to keep your attention on what is in front of you (like driving...) Click here to learn about rumination:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAT9pFN2GqU&t=49s>

Stress Awareness

Reduce your experience to unpleasant, unsafe, or unsatisfactory situations when possible. This includes situations when there is a risk of violence, and societal issues like inequity, discrimination, and oppression. We can initially become anxious and uncertain in times of stress (e.g., reflect on the early days of the pandemic), but we can also get used to living in situations that are sometimes harmful. Think about the times when you are overworking, experiencing social disapproval, or losing money, time or energy. Reduce your exposure when possible.

You may feel stressed out at times. This occurs when you perceive that a situation, event or person poses a challenge or threat to your well-being. Your body's stress response may change your emotions and behaviors as well as its physical symptoms. The reason for this is that when the body perceives stress, it activates the sympathetic nervous system, or the body's "fight or flight or freeze" response. This activation causes a chain reaction of events to occur in the body, including the release of stress hormones into the blood stream, increased heart rate and blood pressure, changes in blood flow, diminished immune functioning and changes in digestion. Everyone has different thresholds for handling stress and adversity. When your stress becomes hard to manage, you may start to feel anxiety or depression. Click here to learn about stress:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnpQrMgDoqE>

Stress Adjustment

Our brains adjust to the information and alarms that we experience daily. This can happen three ways: First, we decrease our sensitivity to repeated warnings: though we may be fearful in the beginning, we start to get control and may feel more confident. Second, we may underestimate the harm linked with actual stress and ignore situational risks. Third, sometimes we cannot tell which stressful events are real or which are not real. Because dealing with false alarms are irritating, we ignore all stressors. We may assume that being in harmful situations are normal. However, your brain and body may still be affected by stress hormones, which change the brain you're your mood.

Practice 2. Learn When Situations Are Not Healthy for Your Mood

Learning to *when* and *how* to avoid harmful situations is a key skill in recovering from depression. We have a deep instinct telling us to freeze or proceed cautiously when we anticipate bad situations. We can quickly become used to difficult situations due to the sensory and cognitive overload and we can delay or miss key information entirely.

This is a concern as it interferes with your ability to perform optimally resulting in low mood. Are the situations that are harmful and how can you change them?

Final Comments

We hope you have learned how to create healthy and balanced routines that build a sense of enjoyment and mastery. We have taught you how to set goals of enjoyment and mastery and how to find reward patterns. We have also taught you how to notice avoidance patterns that lead to depression. Here are the skills we have covered. We hope you found them to be useful. Please feel free to give us feedback if you think we can improve or add information (j-gollan@northwestern.edu).

Two Main Ways to Reduce Your Depression

Increase your ability to predict, use and remember rewards

- Understand what creates depression
- Measure your symptoms using the depression scale
- Track daily mood, where you are and what you are doing
- Add daily enjoyable activities
- Figure out which rewards lift your mood
- Goals of enjoyment and mastery
- Learn to stick to your goals when emotions are strong

Limit avoidance when coping with depression and use it when it keeps you safe

- Track your avoidance
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- How does avoidance help
- Rumination is avoidance, move around when it happens
- Avoid depressing situations when appropriate