Activity Scheduling: Troubleshooting

Spot the barrier | Understand the function | Agree a smaller next step

01 Start with curiosity, not compliance

When an activity is not completed, explore what happened without assuming low motivation. Check the activity was meaningful, manageable, specific and jointly agreed. Ask: "What got in the way when the time came?"

02 A simple troubleshooting pathway

NOTICE: What happened? > EXPLORE: What made it difficult? > ADAPT: Change one feature of the plan > TEST: Try a small step > REVIEW: What did we learn?

03 Check the fit of the activity

Was the task linked to the client's goals or values? Was it too large, vague, costly or inaccessible? Did energy, pain, caring demands, neurodivergent needs or circumstances affect feasibility? Adjust to the person, not a rigid schedule.

04 Separate doing from feeling better

Activity scheduling is not a promise of immediate pleasure. Explore achievement, connection, routine and values as well as enjoyment. A task can be useful even when mood does not change straight away.

Therapist prompts to try

"What would count as a doable version?" "What time and place would help?" "What might make starting easier?" "If this plan does not work, what will we learn?"

Common snags and practical fixes

Use the difficulty as information about the plan, not a judgement of the client

01 "I could not get started"

Explore: Starting cost too high, low energy, unclear first action.

Try: Agree a 2-minute entry step; pair it with an existing cue.

02 "I forgot"

Explore: No prompt, timing mismatch or competing demands.

Try: Choose a visible reminder and a specific time/place.

03 "I planned too much"

Explore: Activity too ambitious for current capacity.

Try: Reduce duration, frequency or number of tasks.

04 "I did it but felt no better"

Explore: Expectation of instant mood change.

Try: Review mastery, meaning and longer-term patterns too.

05 "I avoided it"

Explore: Anticipated distress, fear, shame or uncertainty.

Try: Explore predictions; consider a graded, supported step.

06 "Something unexpected happened"

Explore: Practical barriers or changing circumstances.

Try: Build a flexible alternative rather than a pass/fail rule.

Review, adapt and plan again

A brief session tool for collaborative behavioural activation

05 Worked example: low mood and withdrawal

Plan: "Go for a 30-minute walk every morning." Outcome: no walks. Exploration: mornings are exhausting and the route feels overwhelming. Revised experiment: step outside after lunch for 3 minutes on two chosen days; record what happened, not just mood.

06 Collaborative review template

Agreed activity and why it matters: _____

What actually happened? _____

What helped or got in the way? _____

Smallest useful change for next time: _____

07 If the plan repeatedly stalls

Revisit the shared formulation and treatment goals. Consider whether distress, risk, significant symptoms, environmental obstacles or a mismatch in intervention need further assessment, supervision or a different approach. Avoid simply increasing task demands.

08 End-of-session checklist

[ ] Client chose a meaningful target. [ ] Activity is specific and feasible. [ ] Barriers and support considered. [ ] Time/place agreed. [ ] Flexible fallback identified. [ ] Review plan agreed.

Quick reference

Ask what happened > Identify the barrier > Scale or adapt the task > Agree a concrete experiment > Review learning. Keep the tone curious and collaborative.