Behavioural Activation Planning

A collaborative, step-by-step blueprint for beginner CBT therapists

1 Start with the maintaining cycle

Low mood can lead to withdrawal or reduced activity. This may reduce opportunities for enjoyment, connection and accomplishment, helping to maintain low mood. Explore the client's own pattern rather than assuming it applies.

2 Map current routines and mood

Ask: "What does a typical day look like?" "When is mood a little better or worse?" "What have you stopped doing?" Use a simple activity diary to note activity, mood (0-10) and context without judging productivity.

3 Identify what matters

Look for activities linked to **pleasure, mastery, connection and daily necessities**. Ask what the client misses, values or wants to rebuild. Include rest and accessibility needs; activity is not a test of willpower.

4 Choose one achievable starting action

Agree a small, observable activity with a realistic day, time and duration. Example: "Walk outside for five minutes after lunch on Tuesday" rather than "exercise more". Let the client choose.

COLLABORATIVE LANGUAGE

"Would it be useful to test one small change this week?" "What feels possible on a difficult day?" "What might get in the way?"

From plan to practice

Make the next action specific, supported and testable

5 Break down the task

Reduce the effort required: prepare materials, choose a shorter duration, arrange support or use a graded sequence. Example: put shoes by the door -> step outside -> walk to the corner.

6 Anticipate barriers without blame

Explore fatigue, anxiety, pain, resources, caring duties, uncertainty and avoidance. Ask: "What could make this easier?" Develop an if-then backup plan; do not frame non-completion as failure.

7 Record what actually happens

Review whether the action was attempted, what got in the way, and how it felt before, during and after. Mood does not have to improve immediately for the experiment to provide useful information.

EXAMPLE / LOW MOOD AND WITHDRAWAL

Pattern: Staying in bed late -> fewer contacts and less routine -> feeling more disconnected.

Chosen action: Text one trusted friend on Wednesday at 5 pm.

Backup: Draft the message first, or send a simple emoji if energy is low.

Review: What was predicted? What happened? What did the client learn?

THERAPIST CHECK

Is this activity **client-chosen**, meaningful, specific, feasible and consistent with their formulation? Is the plan proportionate to their health, circumstances and current risk?

Plan, Review & Adjust

A practical template to use collaboratively in session

ACTIVITY PLAN / WRITE TOGETHER

Activity I choose: _____

Why this matters to me: _____

When and where: _____

Smallest possible version: _____

Possible barrier / helpful response: _____

REVIEW THE EXPERIMENT

[ ] Did the plan happen, partly happen, or not happen?

[ ] What did you notice about mood, energy or connection?

[ ] What helped, and what made it harder?

[ ] What should we repeat, simplify or change next time?

QUICK REFERENCE / 7-STEP PATH

1. Notice the cycle **2.** Map routines **3.** Find meaning

4. Choose a small action **5.** Grade the task

6. Plan for barriers **7.** Review and adapt

Clinical note: Behavioural activation is collaborative and formulation-led. Adapt for disability, neurodivergence, physical health, cultural context and risk. Follow local safeguarding and supervision procedures when needed.