

## Procrastination and Mood

Terry Estrin, Ph.D.  
Registered Psychologist

As a psychologist, I often notice the relationship between procrastination and mood, and how for many of my clients, being proactive rather than avoidant is an effective morale-booster. The more we avoid doing the things that need doing, the worse we feel: even seemingly inconsequential things like not returning a phone call, leaving a bill unpaid, or letting our surroundings get messy can lower our mood, whereas tackling those things head-on usually makes us feel good about ourselves. However, according to a recent article in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, being proactive can also be an important aid to recovery from depression.

Taking action as a means of relieving depression isn't exactly a new idea. In our grandparent's generation, if someone was depressed they were told to get on with life, go to work, get some exercise, and interact with people. Although this approach was often accompanied by the outmoded and unhelpful "depression is a character flaw" message, the basic idea – that changes in action can bring about lasting changes in mood – has now been borne out by a study comparing the effects of Antidepressant Medication, Cognitive Therapy, and Behavioral Activation on depression.

Behavioral Activation means encouraging people to identify life problems and commit to take action in solving those problems (in the study, participants were also taught to ask for what they want and need from others more effectively, and engage in those pleasurable activities that were abandoned when they became depressed) As it turned out, for those participants with severe depression, Behavioral Activation was *just as effective* as antidepressant medication, and more effective than Cognitive Therapy. In my business, that's big news.

It sounds so simple: tackle what you have been avoiding and you will begin to feel better. Yet when a person is depressed it can be astonishingly difficult to do much at all. Few people who have never been depressed realize how incapacitating it can be - which means that our grandparent's exhortation to "get on with life" isn't always sufficient to mobilize someone who is severely depressed. Why is that?

Depression is a cycle. When you are depressed, not only is your mood low, but you also feel tired, apathetic, worthless, and hopeless. Because you expect people to see you as negatively as you see yourself, you may avoid others, and break promises and obligations, which in turn causes others to avoid or reject you. These negative social interactions can lower your self-esteem, leaving you feeling self-critical and guilty – which makes you feel worse, and even less likely to take action or socialize with others.

In other words, the depressed person gives up before they even start – and because depression affects memory and concentration it can be difficult to find your way out. The reason Behavioral Activation works so well is that it interrupts the cycle of hopelessness, futility, and procrastination. The resulting improvement in mood leads to improved memory and concentration, allowing the formerly depressed person to see new possibilities, opportunities, and solutions to problems.

So if you are depressed, or even feeling a little down because of procrastination, what can you do about it? There are excellent workbooks on the topic, such as *Overcoming Depression One Step at a Time: The New Behavioral Activation Approach to Getting Your Life Back* by Michael Addis and Christopher Martell. However, you can also make significant changes on your own, simply by taking the following steps:

1. Make a list of things that you have been avoiding.
2. Choose one task that you feel able to work on.
3. Break that task down into small steps.
4. Schedule when you want to work on each of those steps, and do them.
5. Keep a record of what you did and reward yourself.

What is the value in doing this? Taking action can have a powerful effect: by interrupting the cycle of hopelessness and futility, it boosts morale, which helps you think more clearly and see new possibilities. By starting on this path, you will experience the benefits of taking constructive action, and look toward your future with a sense of optimism.