

Activity planning

improving your mood by organising your day



Activity Planning is a technique that has been used successfully to help many people work improve their mood, sense of well-being, and self-esteem. Scientific research has shown it to be a procedure that actually works. This Infosheet is to help you as you apply the principles of activity planning when you don't have a psychologist there to guide you.

What is Activity Planning?

Activity Planning simply involves organising your day in a structured way. It may involve scheduling tasks that you already have (especially ones that need doing), but you may also think up new tasks (especially ones that you would like to do).

How does Activity Planning Work?

Sometimes you may think “*I waste so much time - I can't seem to decide how to fill my day*”. Or, you may think something like “*I don't seem to enjoy anything*” or “*I can't seem to get anything achieved - I can't finish anything*”.

These kinds of thoughts tend to contribute to feelings of depression. When you feel depressed, you may feel less motivated to become involved in activities. A vicious circle develops where your thoughts get your mood down, your mood makes you feel less like doing things, and this provides evidence for your thoughts.

A good way to break this cycle and change these patterns of thinking is to get out there and prove yourself wrong! You can do this by planning your day's activities in advance. Activity Planning also helps you avoid having to make a lot of minor decisions throughout the day. The day ahead may not seem quite so overwhelming.

What does it involve?

Activity Planning involves the following steps:

Set aside time to plan the day (eg. the previous evening or early in the morning)

Start the day with an activity that provides pleasure and achievement. You can either:

Plan to do a number of activities that you have rated as being high on pleasure or achievement.

“Brain storm” to determine how your time might best be spent. Perhaps you can think about your short-term or long-term goals and choose activities that will help you achieve these goals.

The list of “Pleasant Things To Do” may help you think of activities you enjoy. Don't forget exercise is an important activity.

Try breaking the day down into smaller parts if it seems too difficult to plan a whole day at a time.

Try to obtain a balance between pleasure and achievement. For example, if your day is filled with duties and chores (which may give you a sense of achievement but little pleasure) there will be little time for relaxation and enjoyment. You may not feel very satisfied at the end of the day. Or, if chores are ignored you may feel that nothing has been achieved and that important tasks are piling up and becoming overwhelming.

If you have problems getting started on an activity, try telling yourself exactly what you need to do (eg “Stand up, walk to wardrobe, open the door, reach in with my hands, get out clothes”).

You may want to ask your partner or family to encourage you and remind you to do the activities on your list.

Plan for quality, not quantity (eg. spending half an hour weeding part of the garden is more realistic than planning to weed the whole garden).

Don't expect miracles. Even though some activities may help you feel a bit better straight away, these activities don't provide a long-term 'cure' for how you feel.

When tasks seem overwhelming use goal planning principles. When planning goals you would:

1. Specify exactly what you want to achieve.
2. Break the tasks down into smaller steps.
3. Plan each step and think ahead to anticipate any difficulties that may occur.
4. Put the plan into action.
5. Solve problems as they occur.
6. Focus on what has been achieved after each step has been completed – don't devalue and discount your achievements.
7. Continue with each step until the task is complete.

For example:

1. Ben's goal is to make a new vegetable patch and a flower bed
2. The steps are:
 - (a) Choose some new plants
 - (b) Pull out the old plants (need gloves and a shovel)
 - (c) Prepare the soil (need compost and fertiliser)
 - (d) Put in the new plants
3. He is having trouble working out which plants to use, so he uses a simplified problems-solving approach:
 - (a) He lists the names of all the plants he is considering using
 - (b) He list the pros and cons of each plant (eg. needs sun, needs to be planted in spring, grows quickly, looks pretty etc.)
 - (c) He chooses which plants to use
4. Ben buys the new plants, compost, gloves, and fertilizer; He pulls out the old plants, and so on.
5. One of the tools he wanted is not available, so he thinks about other options (eg. he could borrow it from a friend, try another store, use a different but similar implement etc...)
6. Ben congratulates himself after each step. He reminds himself about how much progress he is making. Ben also shows someone else what he has done.

He continues with each step until he has finished the new garden. Then he sits back and enjoys what he has achieved. Once again, he shows someone else what he has done.

Pleasant things to do

The kinds of activities you can do are limited only by your imagination. Remember to include not just pleasant activities, but also ones that will bring you a sense of achievement.

Table 1.

Look through the list below and select activities you would find pleasant. If none of them appeal to you – try selecting ones that you could or might find even mildly enjoyable. Or, select activities you have found enjoyable in the past. Feel free to add your own activities in the space provided.

Things to do on your own

- Write a letter to a friend
- Write a short story or poem
- Write in your diary
- Play a computer game
- Learn or practice a musical instrument
- Paint, Draw, Do some pottery
- Sing

- Knit
- Do some woodwork
- Do a jigsaw puzzle
- Read a good novel
- Read an interesting non-fiction book
- Read your favorite magazine
- Read the newspaper
- Study a language
- Buy or make a present for someone
- Look through your favorite photo album
- List things you have enjoyed in the past
- Play a card game eg. Patience

Social Activities

- Phone a friend
- Visit a friend, neighbour or relative
- Prepare a special meal for friends or family
- See a play, ballet, or opera
- See your favorite band
- Go to your favorite restaurant
- Play with your children
- Invite friends over for a video and popcorn
- Hold a Trivial Pursuit, Pictionary or Charades evening
- Ask yourself over to a friend's place

Things to do to pamper yourself

- Have (or give yourself) a facial
- Have a massage
- Give someone else a facial or massage
- Try different perfumes in a department store
- Paint your fingernails
- Have a bubble bath
- Try out new hairstyles
- Have a haircut or get your hair coloured
- Hug your favorite person
- Eat your favorite food
- Buy yourself a bunch of flowers
- Buy yourself a new piece of clothing or another special gift

Active Things

- Go for a stroll, brisk walk, or bushwalk
- Go jogging
- Go roller-skating
- Hire a bike
- Hire a tandem-bike
- Do some aerobics
- Do some weight-lifting
- Arrange a game of tennis or squash
- Kick a ball around the oval
- Run up and down stairs for a few minutes
- Join an orienteering club
- Do 10 minutes of gentle stretching exercises
- Play ping-pong
- Have a game of golf
- Go for a swim
- Fly a kite

- Try yoga or tai-chi
- Go surfing
- Go fishing

Things to do away from home

- Walk along the beach
- Go to a movie
- Visit the zoo
- Go to a flea market
- Go shopping
- Go to the library
- Visit a bookshop
- Visit the art gallery
- Visit the museum
- Go to a poetry reading
- Watch a game of football or soccer

Things to do around the house

- Do some gardening
- Do some handiwork around the house
- Rearrange the furniture in the house
- Have a big 'spring-clean'
- Do some sewing
- Listen to music
- Prepare a meal
- Dance to some music
- Watch television
- Play with your pets
- Sit in the sun
- Make a cake

Can you think of any others?

