

## Behavioural Activation & COVID lockdown Self-Help guide

This handout is designed to support your existing self-help programme to help you to become more active and to feel better. As you work through your self-help programme with the support of your Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner (PWP), this handout provides some additional ideas and suggestions in light of the impact of COVID-19 and the lockdown on your activities and mood.

To guide your plans to build up routine, necessary and pleasurable activities, remember one word:

**SPARK** 

The letters in this word summarises a number of proven useful strategies to improve your mood, reduce stress and build well-being.

**SPARK** :

**Specific** – Be specific and concrete – focus on details and context. Ask “How?”

**Plan** – Take control by making plans. Plan what to do and then do the Plan!

**Active** – Be active – do things you enjoy. Be physically AND mentally active

**Routine** – Build routine and structure into your life

**Kind** – Be kind to yourself and others; Take care of yourself

Each of these tips on their own are proven to improve resilience and emotional well-being. Together they can be incredibly powerful as they work to support and complement each other.

## **SPECIFIC: Be Specific and Concrete.**

- Have you ever thought a negative event over and over asking “Why?” and trying to understand and make sense of it? Have you ever had one thing go wrong and then started to think about how this means that lots of other things will go wrong or then jumped to thinking about lots of other bad things that happened? Or ever felt uncertain about something and started wondering “What if?” and imagined a terrible thing happening?
- Nearly everyone has these kinds of thoughts some of the time. They will be even more frequent now with the threats, losses, and uncertainties arising from COVID-19.
- However, thinking this way can quickly take you away from the particulars of a situation, making problems seem bigger, more general and more overwhelming. When your thoughts jump between different situations, your mind never stays on one long enough to come to terms with it or to work something out. Thinking this way fuels worry, low mood, and stress. It makes things seem worse than they really are and makes it hard to keep things in proportion.
- Instead, it is more helpful to think in a specific and concrete way, focused on the details of a situation or problem and its particular circumstances and context – how it happened, what led up to it, what you saw and heard, what you and others said and did. The more specific and detailed your thinking, the more helpful it will be for keeping things in perspective and solving problems.
- When faced with a difficult situation or problem, deliberately slow things down in your mind and pay close attention to your sensory experience & notice what you can see, hear, feel and touch. Attend to your surroundings and notice what makes this situation different from other situations.
- Ground yourself in the specific details and circumstances of what happens and what you can do. Recall how you got to this point as may give you clues as to what could be done differently. Then focus on how you can move forwards and what you can do to address the situation. Then put this plan into action.
- “How?” and “What?” questions are more helpful than “Why?” and “What if?” questions as they ground you in the situation and towards useful action. See the exercise in the box below for more examples.
- Research suggests that regularly practising this exercise improves problem-solving, increases resilience and reduces worry, stress, anxiety and depression.

### **Being Specific: Write down responses to these questions to practice**

1. Describe the situation – where is it? What can you see, hear, feel? What makes it unique?

2. How did this happen? What was the sequence of steps that led to this situation?

3. How can I start to move forward from this situation? How can I resolve this problem? What is the first step I can take? How can I break this down into smaller steps?

## **PLAN: Take control by making plans. Plan what to do and then Do the Plan!**

- Planning is important to taking control. Just by making plans to work on your goals, you will get more in control.
- Planning involves identifying the steps you need to take to reach a goal or fix a problem. Working out the plan and then putting it into action will begin to build your control over a situation, however bad, bit by bit.
- Start by focusing on what you can do and what you can influence. Be realistic. Choose goals that are achievable. Work on how you can make progress towards your goals.
- Focus on what you can do differently and what you can change. Don't rely on other people or circumstances changing. Give yourself a time limit to deliver the plan. Try and make sure that you can measure progress towards the goal.
- It doesn't matter if at first your plans are focused on small and immediate things. Start with these and with each success, you will gain a sense of achievement and get closer to your goals.
- Useful plans spell out when, where, with whom, and how you will do something. The more specific the plan, the more likely it is that you will put it into action. Schedule when you will put a plan into action and write it in your diary or save it in your calendar. This will increase your chances of doing it.
- If something seems too big to do and it feels like it is overwhelming, it helps to break the task down into smaller specific steps. Think what is the first smallest step necessary to start moving towards your goal, and start on that.
- As best you can, try and proceed with your plans no matter how you feel – go ahead even if you feel tired, bored, low or anxious. Focus on what you want to achieve from the plans. Put yourself in charge by doing the plan because it works towards your goals despite how you feel.
- Make detailed plans for the week ahead for necessary activities (the things you need to do, e.g., important chores, work deadlines), for pleasurable activities (things that you enjoy and that help you feel good) and for mastery activities (things that give a sense of accomplishment).

### **My Plans: write down your responses to plan**

What do I need to do this week, what pleasurable activities do I want to do, what mastery activities can I do?

Write down the most important activity:

When will I do it?:

Where will I do it?:

How will I do it? What are the steps involved? What is the smallest first step?:

## ACTIVE: BE ACTIVE

- One of the best ways to improve your emotional well-being and mood is to be active. This includes being physically active, creatively active, mentally active and socially active.
- As best you can, try and do things that you enjoy and value. Build things up in small steps.
- A very effective activity to improve mood and wellbeing is exercise and keeping fit. During lockdown, explore how you can undertake an exercise routine at home, in your garden, in a large empty park, or go for local walks, within the NHS and Government precautions. Check out YouTube exercise videos or online exercise classes you may like to try. Get up and move around regularly. Dance to your favourite music.
- Other useful activities are those that get your mind working or stimulate your creativity. Good examples are: drawing, painting, creating music, photography, animating, gardening, cooking, writing, crafting, playing an instrument, baking. Take an opportunity to learn something new.
- It is a good idea to build in some variety in your plans – to make sure that you are doing different things over time to stop you getting bored with an activity. Don't just binge on one activity until it loses interest.
- One effect of the lockdown and social isolation is that personally important and enjoyable activities may be temporarily unavailable, especially those involving other people and places outside the home. Think about what things you can do at home that REPLACE those activities. What did you find enjoyable and engaging about the activities that you missed? What did you value about them? What could you do at home that has some of the same qualities and values?
- Another useful way of being ACTIVE is to act in a opposite way to negative feelings. OPPOSITE ACTION involves deliberately acting in the opposite direction to physical and emotional states to gain control and reduce the triggers for stress and worry. For example, if feeling tense is an early sign that you are getting wound up and likely to lose your temper then doing something calming and relaxing is a good opposite action. If feeling tired often leads to giving up on doing things, it is useful to do something energising like dancing to your favourite song.

**ACTIVE: write down your responses to reflect on how to increase positive ACTIVITY and build into your plans**

What will I do to be more physically active?

What will I do to be more mentally and creatively active?

Replacing an activity I can't do because of lockdown or social isolation

What did I find enjoyable and engaging about this activity?

What did I value about it?

What could I do at home that has some of the same qualities and values?

## **ROUTINE: Have Structure and a Regular Routine**

- Having regular routines and good structure is really important for your mental health.
- Our moods are determined by our habits and routines. The loss of routine can unbalance us emotionally and increase our stress and low mood.
- Having structure and routine can make us calmer, more balanced and resilient. Having little structure and routine can be destabilising, make things feel chaotic, which in turn builds stress and negatively impacts sleep and health.
- Core parts of healthy structure are having 3 regular meals a day (breakfast, lunch, and dinner), regular times for going to bed and getting up, well-established routines for washing, dressing, etc and a regular structure for our day. This provides a strong foundation for boosting well-being. Getting this foundation is a great first step in looking after yourself.
- Building in routine and structure is particularly important given the impact of COVID-19 and the lockdown on disrupting our normal routines: with many people housebound, there is a loss of regular schedules for work, commuting, and school.
- Try to schedule when you will spend time working or studying, doing chores, preparing meals, looking after children, and relaxing. Make sure that there is a clear boundary between work and home life.
- Routine and structure are especially important for good sleep. Try to go to bed and get up at the same time every day. Have a regular wind-down schedule in the evening so that you are not doing anything stressful or preoccupying for a few hours before going to bed.
- Doing things at the same time every day can help things to become habitual and easier to do. When trying to build positive habits, try to make them part of your regular routine by linking them to your existing routine.

**ROUTINE: write down your responses to reflect on how to improve your routine & build into your plans**

What has changed about my routine since lockdown?

What can I do to build more structure into my day?

## **KIND: Be Kind to Yourself and to Others**

- We all need support and encouragement during this difficult time. Being kind and compassionate to others makes both them and you feel good.
- It is completely normal to feel anxious or upset in these unprecedented times of pandemic and lockdown: everyone else will also be experiencing negative feelings too. It is okay to not always feel okay.
- When times are tough, soothing and comforting yourself is an important part of maintaining your resilience. Talk to yourself in an encouraging and caring way. Do things to look after yourself.
- It is easy to become critical with ourselves and with others when things don't go to plan or when faced with the frustrations of lockdown. This is when it is most helpful to be caring, tolerant, supportive, encouraging and kind.
- If you notice yourself being hard on yourself or being self-critical, then try and be kinder to yourself. Think about how you would talk to a good friend or loved one who was experiencing a similar situation. What comforting words would you say? How would you say them? What tone of voice would you use? Try and talk to yourself this way.
- Be encouraging. Point out progress made and previous successes. Remind yourself of your strengths and good qualities. Highlight what you have learnt from past difficulties.
- Try and talk in a calm, gentle, supportive and kind tone of voice.
- Use these approaches to build kindness to yourself and to others.
- It is important to act in a way that is caring to yourself. What would you do more of to look after yourself? For example, are you making time to relax and recharge; eating a good diet and getting plenty of sleep?
- What would you do less of to look after yourself? For example, spending less time with people who are negative or reducing activities that aren't good for your wellbeing. In the current crisis, checking news and social media too often may not be good for your mood. Instead, schedule to only check news and social media in short bursts once or twice a day.
- The more you act in a way that cares for yourself and indicates that you value yourself, the more positive you will feel about yourself.

### **KIND: write down your responses to reflect on how to be kinder**

What would I say to a close friend or loved one to support them? Try saying that to yourself.

What can I do MORE of to look after myself?

What can I do LESS of to look after myself?