

What is Behavioral Activation (BA) And How Is It Used To Treat Depression?

Behavioral activation (BA) is “a structured, brief [psychotherapeutic approach](#) that aims to (a) increase engagement in adaptive activities (which often are those associated with the experience of pleasure or mastery), (b) decrease engagement in activities that maintain depression or increase risk for depression, and (c) solve problems that limit access to reward or that maintain or increase aversive control” (Dimidjian et al., 2011).

The main idea behind BA as a treatment for depression is “to allow patients with depressive symptoms to [learn to cope](#) with their negativity” and to “increase positive awareness through the re-development of personal goals in the form of short, medium and long-term [life goals](#)” (Chan et al., 2017).

In other words, BA is a type of therapeutic [intervention](#) (most often used to treat depression) that focuses on behavioral changes in a client’s daily life. BA interventions might involve helping the client plan more activities they actually enjoy doing, helping the client develop their social skills, or just generally having the client track their own emotions and activities. Behavioural Activation is a highly-personalized intervention that targets one’s depression by targeting the behaviors that feed into that [depression](#).

Behaviorism: The Behaviorist Theory Behind BA



Behavioral activation is informed by a behavioral model of depression, such as the one outlined by Lewinsohn & Shaffer (1971). These researchers believed that depression was a behavioral issue (as opposed to a cognitive issue) that arose from a lack of positive reinforcement, particularly in [social relationships](#). Since they subscribed to a behavioral model of depression, the authors believed that the best way to treat depression was to “restore an adequate schedule of positive reinforcement for the individual by changing the patient’s behavior and/or the environment”.

While some psychologists still subscribe to radical behaviorism, most modern behavioral models are not exclusively behaviorist and do include cognitive components. Most modern psychological models, in general, include both cognitive and behavioral aspects, exemplified by [cognitive-behavioral therapy](#) (CBT), perhaps the most common therapeutic treatment today. In fact, behavioral activation has begun to be explored as a component of CBT for disorders beyond depression, such as anxiety (Boswell et al., 2017).

Interestingly, behavioral activation may even be the driving force behind the [efficacy](#) of CBT. A study by Jacobson et al. (1996) which found that to be the case is one of the main reasons people are interested in Behavioral Activation today. Specifically, those researchers found that people with depression who completed BA saw as many benefits as people with depression who completed both BA and some [cognitive components of CBT](#).

While behaviorists no longer deny the importance of cognition, they still advocate for behavioral treatments over cognitive treatments, since behaviors are easy to target than [thoughts](#). The paper cited above (Jacobson et al., 1996) indicates that behavioral activation may even be the reason CBT is so effective. Thus, while behaviorists no longer necessarily think that positive reinforcement is the only way to treat depression, they still believe it is one of the best ways.