

Behavioural Activation: The Brain as the World's Worst Life Coach

Why We Get Stuck, Why We Avoid, and Why Waiting Doesn't Work

Monica Dunlop – Psychologist

When we're struggling—whether it's depression, anxiety, grief, burnout, trauma, stress, low self-esteem, or simply a really difficult period of life—our brains become surprisingly convincing life coaches.

The problem is that they're terrible at long-term planning.

Instead, they become experts at helping us escape whatever feels uncomfortable right now.

Our brain starts offering us solutions:

Depression says...	Anxiety says...	Burnout says...	Stress says...
"Stay in bed."	"Don't go."	"We've got nothing left to give."	"Do it tomorrow."
"You don't have the energy."	"Cancel."	"Withdraw from everything."	"It'll be easier later."
"Nobody wants to hear from you anyway."	"It's safer if we stay home."		

After a while, the pattern becomes predictable:

Immediate Problem	Brain's Solution
Anxiety	Avoid it
Sadness	Withdraw
Shame	Hide
Stress	Procrastinate
Exhaustion	Do nothing

The problem isn't that your brain is trying to sabotage you—it's trying to protect you. It just isn't very good at predicting what will actually help in the long term.

Why Avoidance Keeps Us Stuck

Avoidance works.

At least for a little while.

Cancel the social event and your anxiety drops. Put off the difficult email and you feel relief. Stay in bed instead of exercising and you don't have to push through exhaustion.

The relief is real—but it's temporary.

Every time we avoid something, our brain learns two things:

1. *That situation must have been dangerous.*
2. *Avoidance worked.*

The next time, avoiding feels even more appealing.

Behavioural activation interrupts that cycle. Every time we choose a small action instead of avoidance, our brain receives new evidence. Instead of learning, "*I can't cope*," it slowly begins learning, "*Maybe I can*."

Over time, our mood often begins to follow our behaviour. We don't act because we feel better—we often start to feel better because we acted.

Waiting for Motivation Is the Trap

This is where many people get stuck.

We often believe motivation comes first—that one day we'll wake up wanting to clean the house, answer emails, exercise, or reconnect with people.

That would be lovely.

Unfortunately, that's rarely how motivation works.

Motivation is usually the result of action, not the cause of it.

You don't have to want to do something before you do it. Most of us don't want to get out of bed on cold mornings, go to work, do the dishes, or visit the dentist. We do those things anyway because we know they're worthwhile.

Behavioural activation works the same way.

If your thoughts sound like, "*I can't be bothered*," or "*I'll do it tomorrow*," your brain simply follows those instructions. Instead, try something more workable:

"I don't feel like doing this, but I know it helps."

"I'll just start and see what happens."

The goal isn't positive thinking. It's creating enough momentum to begin.

"But Monica... I Don't Want To."

I know. Honestly, neither do most people.

We don't usually feel excited about going to the dentist, doing the dishes, or getting out of a warm bed on a cold winter morning. Yet we often do those things anyway because they're important.

Behavioural activation works the same way. You don't have to *want* to do something before you do it. Sometimes willingness comes after you've started.

Think about a time you really didn't feel like doing something but did it anyway. You may not have loved it, but chances are you felt better for having done it.

"Okay Monica... But Where Do I Even Start?"

Smaller than you think.

As anyone close to me knows, 2026 somehow became my year of running.

Am I good at it?

No.

Do I always enjoy it?

Also no.

The best advice I received was simple: **"run slowly—embarrassingly slowly."**

Behavioural activation works the same way.

Small isn't lowering the standard.

It's lowering the starting point. Action creates momentum, and momentum is often what motivation feels like.

Small might be:

- putting your shoes on
- stepping outside for five minutes
- replying to one message
- having a shower
- cooking something simple
- ordering takeaway because that's genuinely all you can manage today

Small is whatever keeps you moving without overwhelming you.

Because motivation isn't built by giant leaps.

It's built through small wins that tell your brain, *"I can still do difficult things."*

Mastery and Pleasure

Once you've started moving again, the next question is: *What should I actually do?*

A helpful place to start is with two types of activities: Mastery and Pleasure.

Mastery is anything that leaves you thinking, *"I did the thing."* It might be replying to an email, folding the washing, attending an appointment, or cooking dinner.

Pleasure is anything that makes life feel just a little lighter, like sitting in the sun, having a coffee with a friend, listening to music, or watching a favourite show.

When we're struggling, both mastery and pleasure are often the first things to disappear. Our world quietly becomes smaller.

The goal isn't to do more. It's to reconnect with what matters.

Choose activities that move you towards the kind of person you want to be, even if they're tiny. Some days that might be spending time with your children, going for a walk, gardening, painting, volunteering, or simply stepping outside.

Meaning matters more than productivity.

The Important Bit

You will miss days.

Everyone does.

Behavioural activation isn't about maintaining a perfect streak. It's about restarting sooner.

Don't measure success by asking, *"Did I feel better?"*

Instead ask:

"Did I do the thing I planned to do?"

Feelings often take time to catch up.

Behaviour comes first.

Before you turn the page, choose one activity.

Make it smaller than feels necessary.

Do it within the next hour.

Not because you're motivated.

Because understanding behavioural activation doesn't change your life.

Practising it does.

Key Idea

You don't need motivation to begin. You need to begin to build motivation.