

Coping with low mood: Activity scheduling

People affected by cancer often find that it has an impact on the things they can do day-to-day. You might notice that you have gradually (or suddenly) stopped doing many of the things that you value, such as spending time with loved ones, doing hobbies or physical activity. Some of these activities may not be possible for you to do at the moment. For example, time spent at the hospital might take you away from spending time with family, or treatment side effects might mean that you are too unwell to do your usual tasks.

However, there may be activities you value and could still do, but you have just not been feeling up to doing them because of the emotional impact of cancer. It is important to acknowledge that avoiding some activities can offer some relief in the short-term. These might be activities you could do in the past (eg attending a family gathering) or new things that you are having to consider (eg having difficult conversations with people about your diagnosis). When you decide to avoid these activities, you might notice a reduction in your anxiety levels and a sense of relief. This short-term relief may tempt you to continue avoiding activities that matter to you but feel difficult.

Unfortunately, there are often longer-term costs to not doing the things that matter to us. As well as having a negative impact on our physical strength and wellbeing, another frequent consequence of this avoidance and withdrawal is low mood. It can, for example, take away valuable sources of enjoyment, identity, meaning and connection with others. This can then add an extra layer to our sadness.

The diagram below shows how this vicious cycle can become self-fulfilling:

Context: Cancer

Thinking

'My life's nothing like it used to be'
'Nobody wants to see me like this anyway'

Feelings

Sad, isolated, anxious



Behaviours

Stop doing the things that matter to me
Cancel/avoid making any plans



Being affected by cancer often leaves people struggling with a loss of control, so one of the simplest and most powerful things you can do to help yourself is focusing on something that you do have more control over: your behaviours. It can be helpful to think carefully about what really matters to you in life, and what small steps you can take to give yourself the best life possible alongside cancer. Below are some steps to establishing an activity schedule that could help you to break out of cycles of avoidance and withdrawal, and to create a more rewarding routine that could have a positive impact on your physical and emotional wellbeing.



1. Create a list of 'ACE' activities

- Activity scheduling is not about doing more activities for the sake of it. It is about trying to ensure that you are doing a range of activities that you find rewarding. One way of achieving this is to make sure you are planning a balance of 'ACE' activities: activities that give you a sense of Achievement, Connection and Enjoyment. Using the table at the end of this information sheet, come up with at least three activities you already do, or would like to do, for each category.
- A common difficulty for many people with cancer is that they cannot do the activities they want to. When this is the case, it can be helpful to think about why these activities or goals are so valuable to you (eg you found your work important because it was a way of 'supporting others' or 'being creative'). Identifying the values behind an activity can then help you discover alternative ACEs that feel more manageable (eg painting at home or supporting others by calling a friend and checking in on how they are). This is not about pretending that the new activity is as good as the one you did before; it is about finding a middle ground between doing the same activities you were doing and doing nothing.



- ACE activities look different for different people, depending on what matters to them and what they feel able to do. For example, if you are currently not able to meet people in person, phone calls and video chats can be a great way of connecting with others.

While Connection often refers to feeling connected with other people, some people might give equal (or more) weight to connecting with nature or animals. If you are struggling to think of activities, you could try asking somebody else to help you with this.

2. Schedule a balance of 'ACE' activities for the next week

- Using the blank activity schedule at the end of this handout, first write out any activities you already have planned for the next week. For example, attending a hospital appointment might be one of your meaningful activities that is connected to a value of looking after your wellbeing.
- Once you know what times you have free, select a handful of activities that you would especially like to engage in over the next week. If possible, try to select a balance of ACE activities (ie a relatively even spread of activities that will give you a sense of Achievement, Connection and Enjoyment). Now think about when you might be able to do these activities. Depending on the activity, you might want to consider factors such as how much energy you tend to have at certain times of day. For example, if you are a morning person, you could pencil in physical activity earlier on in the day.
- It is important to pace your activities. While it is helpful to stay active, you are more likely to be able to carry on doing the things that matter to you if you spread these out in a manageable way across the week, rather than packing in so much that you will exhaust yourself and not be able to do anything the next day.

3. Engage in the scheduled 'ACE' activities

- You've created a list of activities, you've scheduled them in... now it's time to do them. It is natural to have some resistance to follow through with this, and you might notice thoughts like 'This isn't going to help' or 'Why bother?'. Try to simply acknowledge and validate these thoughts, and then re-focus on what you have planned. Give yourself a chance to see if this is something that can make a helpful difference for you.

It could also be helpful to try to re-frame some of the thoughts that you notice. For example, 'Given what I'm going through it is ok for me to want to avoid meeting up with a friend, but even though part of me doesn't want to do it, I can still do it as it could be helpful for me.'

- People often think that a change in mood should come before they engage in activities, but it often works the other way round. An improvement in mood can be a welcome by-product/bonus to doing the things that matter to us. Getting started with these activities can be like jump-starting a car: it might require a big push to begin with but then gradually becomes easier as you pick up momentum.
- To help you with that initial push, you could try setting yourself a '5-minute guide': commit doing the activity for at least 5 minutes and then you can decide whether you want to continue with it or not.
- If there are some activities that you end up not doing, try not to get put off continuing with activity scheduling because this is often a trial-and-error process. Try to pencil in the activities for a future day (or scrap them if you really no longer want to engage in them), and then re-focus on whatever you have planned next.

4. Rate the activities and take your learning forward

- It can be helpful to rate the activities as you go along, and one way of doing this is to write down a score out of 10 for Achievement, Connection and Enjoyment (eg 'Did some light gardening: A=6, C=3, E=8'). This can help you to get a sense of what activities you find most rewarding, and to then think about which ones you would like to prioritise. You might be surprised by how fulfilling (or unfulfilling) certain activities are, which is valuable learning to take forward. Use this information to guide you in the schedules you make for the days and weeks ahead.
- Try to have some flexibility with yourself: what is possible one week might not be possible in the next week (eg the days after chemotherapy are usually more challenging than a week or two later).

5. Rewards

- Try to acknowledge every step you make, however small you think it is. Find ways to reward yourself for committing to your activity schedule. It is up to you how you do this, it could be:
 - Saying to yourself "Well done, you did it!"
 - Telling a loved one what you have been able to do
 - Treating yourself to one of your favourite things to eat or drink
 - Buying yourself a little gift.
- It can also be rewarding to pay attention in a curious way to the activities you are doing, and any differences you notice this making to your life.

Activity scheduling aims to help you to establish some structure and ensure you are able to live the best life you can in difficult circumstances.



If your mood is affecting your ability to engage in other areas of your life, it could be helpful to speak with your specialist nurse or doctor about this to get further advice. **If you need any specialist advice about your cancer treatment and appointments, please contact The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline. This hotline is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week on 020 8915 6899.**

If you would like further advice on coping with low mood or engaging in rewarding activities, other psychological information sheets are available from The Royal Marsden or you may want to visit one of the following websites:

Cancer Research

'About depression and cancer'

<https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/coping/emotionally/cancer-and-your-emotions/depression/depression-and-cancer>

Get Self Help

'Depression Self Help'

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/depression.htm>

Centre for Clinical Interventions

'Depression Self-Help Resources'

<https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself/Depression>

The Royal Marsden's Adult Psychological Support Service offers short-term, cancer-specific psychological support. This includes psycho-sexual therapy and couples counselling. You can either self-refer or ask somebody in your Royal Marsden healthcare team to refer you. We can provide psychological support to people up to two years following their active cancer treatment.

For more information, visit this website:

<https://www.royalmarsden.nhs.uk/your-care/adult-support-services/adult-psychological-support-service>.

**Alternatively, contact us directly on
020 7808 2777 (Chelsea) or
020 8661 3006 (Sutton).**

List of ACE activities

Achievement	
Connection	
Enjoyment	

Activity schedule

	Morning	Afternoon	Evening
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

Schedule activities in boxes above and once you have done them, give ratings out of 10 for Achievement, Connection and Enjoyment (eg A=6, C=8, E=7). Remember to pace yourself with this: try to spread your ACE activities out in a manageable way across the week.

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This booklet is evidence based wherever the appropriate evidence is available,
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Details of the references used in writing this booklet are available on request from:

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