

Session 2: 'What am I avoiding?'

In today's session we talked about how one of the most important factors keeping depression going is withdrawal and avoidance. When we feel depressed it has two effects on our motivation: firstly, because we largely lose the ability to feel pleasure, even when we are doing something we used to enjoy, we don't get the reward from activities that we once did. As a consequence we are less likely to do activities that might lift our mood or give us a sense of achievement. We therefore miss opportunities to engage in positive and helpful activities. Psychologists call this a lack of *positive reinforcement*.

Secondly, another symptom of depression is that we find everyday tasks that used to be straightforward much more difficult to do, or we dread making the attempt. Low mood 'tells us' that it's either not worth the effort, or that it will be difficult or unpleasant. We are therefore tempted to avoid everyday tasks or invitations to socialise. You may have noticed that the more we avoid the harder it gets to do the activity the next time. And the more often we avoid a task, the more problems can build up and threaten to overwhelm us. For example: the pile of unopened post gets larger and we find that more and more we dread what's inside, making us feel even worse about ourselves and more likely to continue to avoid the thing we dread. Psychologists call this cycle of avoidance *negative reinforcement*.

We would like you to try an experiment to spot the differing effects on your mood of either avoiding activities or engaging in activities: we would like you to collect two examples of each and write them in the mood and activity chart and then come back and tell us what you've discovered.

Let's start with an example. Tess has been depressed for a couple of months and has substantially reduced the amount of time she spends with her family and friends, who she had previously found very supportive. On Wednesday her mother called her but Tess felt so low she ignored the phone when she saw that it was her mother. The first entry in her chart looked like this:

	<i>Date: Wednesday</i>
Time of day	<i>4pm</i>
What was happening: who, where, what doing?	<i>Sitting at home on the sofa, thinking about going back to work: the phone rang and I saw that it was my Mum calling</i>
What emotion I felt (rating out of 100)	<i>Sad: 75/100</i> <i>Anxious 50/100</i>
How I responded to feeling that way: what went through my mind, what did I do?	<i>When I saw it was my Mum I thought that I couldn't face talking to her right then so I cancelled the call and turned off my phone</i>
What was the outcome of responding this way: how did I feel afterwards, did my situation change?	<i>I carried on feeling sad and even got tearful when I thought about how alone I am</i>

Later that week Tess got another call, this time from her friend Helen. On this occasion she wasn't feeling quite so low, but she still noticed her heart jumped when the phone rang. This time though she answered the call. When she wrote down the details in the next column of her chart it looked like this:

	<i>Date: Friday</i>
Time of day	<i>7-30pm</i>
What was happening: who, where, what doing?	<i>Watching TV</i>
What emotion I felt (rating out of 100)	<i>Sad: 35/100</i> <i>Anxious 70/100</i>
How I responded to feeling that way: what went through my mind, what did I do?	<i>When I saw it was Helen I got a shock and wanted to ignore it but I told myself I really should talk to her so she doesn't think I'm ignoring her</i>
What was the outcome of responding this way: how did I feel afterwards, did my situation change?	<i>We had a really nice chat and arranged to meet for a coffee on Saturday morning, she was really sympathetic and I felt better afterwards and was even looking forward to seeing her.</i>

Of course it's not always quite that easy and straightforward. What's most important is that you collect some examples for yourself and see how this process works for you.

We want to help you to find your own solutions and we hope that filling in this chart will help you to find out what effect avoiding people or activities is having on your mood. We also want you to start to discover under what circumstances you might be able to tackle some of the things that you have been avoiding, and we'll be discussing that further in the following week.

Come and tell us how you got on. Until we see you then 'Good Luck'

Mood and Activity Chart

	Date:	Date:	Date:	Date:
Time of day				
What was happening: who, where, what doing?				
What emotion I felt (rating out of 100)				
How I responded to feeling that way: what went through my mind, what did I do?				
What was the outcome of responding this way: how did I feel afterwards, did my situation change?				