



Behavioral Activation Techniques while Physical Distancing

Countries around the world are issuing stay-at-home and social distancing orders to combat the spread of COVID-19. This creates a unique challenge for clinicians who still need to conduct behavioral activation techniques for their clients. The University of Virginia's Program for Anxiety, Cognition, and Treatment Lab has compiled some suggestions for behavioral activation suggestions that adhere to physical distancing rules. We have organized them by prominent goal domains.

Ways to...

Work or perform other activities that help you to be and feel productive

- New skills: the **original goal** may have been to attend a workshop to develop a new professional skill or pick up a new hobby, but a **revised goal** could be to take a class virtually or arrange a 'skill swap' where you teach someone a class on one topic they need to learn and they teach you a class on a topic you need to learn
- Organization: the **original goal** may have been to clean out your office or work desk, but a **revised goal** could be to clean your house or apartment, reorganize your storage spaces, or make bags of extra items you have to give away
- Cooking: the **original goal** may have been learning a new recipe or technique from a friend or professional in person, but a **revised goal** could be to cook with someone over a video call, or to reach out to family members and friends to create a personal cookbook
- Schoolwork: the **original goal** may have been to have more one-on-one meetings with teachers or professors, create study groups with friends, or even just attend class more often, but a **revised goal** could be to use Zoom or email to connect with teachers and professors, create virtual study groups, and to attempt a similar routine as if it were a normal school day

Engage in fun activities for some positive or pleasurable experiences

- Socialization: the **original goal** may have been to meet up with friends for public activities, but a **revised goal** could be to have a weekly virtual happy hour or coffee hour
- Enjoying the arts: the **original goal** may have been to go to the movies, a concert, or a gallery, but a **revised goal** could be to create a movie night at home with popcorn and snacks, or tune into a virtual concert
- Creativity: the **original goal** may have been to attend a new writing, art, or music class, but a **revised goal** could be to paint at home, make a scrapbook, color in a coloring book, practice photography in your neighborhood, or make personalized playlists to send to people in your life
- Reading: the **original goal** may have been to join a book club, or spend more time at a library or bookstore, but a **revised goal** could be to join a virtual book club or do a book swap by trading books with family and friends

Relax with activities that give you a break

- Reduce physical tension: the **original goal** may have been to get a massage, but a **revised goal** could be to take a bubble bath or participate in an online stretch class
- Take a self-care break: the **original goal** may have been to go to the movie theater or to a spa, but a **revised goal** could be to practice aromatherapy, write in a journal, or paint your own nails
- Gaming and sports: the **original goal** may have been to play on a recreational sports team or go to athletic public places, such as minigolf, but a **revised goal** could be to practice new athletic skills in an outdoor area near you or to set up a time to connect with teammates online
- Meditation: the **original goal** may have been to go to a meditation studio or temple, but a **revised goal** could be to go for a walk while playing a meditation app, find a meditation program online, and create an at-home meditation schedule

Stay active & healthy

- Regular exercise: the **original goal** may have been to go to a gym regularly, but a **revised goal** could be to run outside, join online Zoom workouts, create an at-home workout routine, or set exercise goals (like a 30-day plank challenge)
- Eat healthy: the **original goal** may have been to try new healthy restaurants or buy more groceries from a farmer's market, but a **revised goal** could be to learn new recipes to cook yourself, or pick up food from local, healthy restaurants
- Sleep well: the **original goal** may have been to go out more during the day to escape the temptation of going back to bed, but a **revised goal** could be to set a workspace outside of your bedroom so you don't feel the urge to lay in bed

Live your values

- Support causes you believe in: the **original goal** may have been to volunteer weekly at a charity or organization that is important to you, but a **revised goal** could be to donate money if you are in the position to do so, make face masks at home, or donate extra pantry items to a food bank
- Helping the Earth: the **original goal** may have been to go with a group to clean up a public area, but a **revised goal** could be to walk or bike when you need to leave the house, or use this time to learn more about recycling and how best to divide up discarded goods
- Spirituality: the **original goal** may have been to spend more time in religious settings and engage in religious rituals in public settings, but a **revised goal** could be to connect with religious communities virtually or keep a journal about spirituality

Successful Techniques for Clinicians

- Encourage clients to find a good balance of activities that are consistent with their goals and needs.
- Some clients will need to make a detailed schedule, planning exact times and specific plans for each activity (e.g., read 10 pages of algebra textbook on Tuesday at 5:00 pm), while others may simply need to set general daily goals (workout, make dinner, do schoolwork). Keep in mind the extent of specific planning needed is likely to change over time based on client mood, motivation, proficiency at scheduling and follow-through, etc.
- Remember to ask what activities a person has been avoiding due to negative mood or low motivation so they can think about including those (this does not refer to activities avoided due to appropriate physical distancing and safety measures).
- Remember to ask clients about obstacles that might make it difficult for them to complete the planned activities and ask how they want to handle those challenges.