



Trends is published regularly throughout the school year by **Cornerstone Day School** as a service to New Jersey school professionals. Each issue highlights one important topic with practical applications for those working with students with emotional problems.

# TRENDS

## BEHAVIORAL ACTIVATION

### Acting opposite

Behavioral activation or 'acting opposite' is a tool we can teach students to help them manage sadness. As always, it's important to understand how this tool works and to provide the rationale to kids to get their buy-in:

When we feel strong emotions, that emotion often gives us a strong drive to do a certain behavior. That might relieve the strong emotion in the short-term, but in the long-term can make the emotion worse and at extremes start or worsen mental health problems. As an example, when we feel sad, we may want to lay in bed and eat ice cream – which feels great while we're doing it, but often, compounds the sadness. Cognitive behavioral therapy gives us a tool with which to address these 'emotion-driven behaviors,' called 'acting opposite.' It's when we do the opposite of what the emotion is telling us to do. Here, we will focus on the emotion of sadness.

Sadness tells us to withdraw, slow down, get inactive, which can start a toxic cycle in which the worse we feel, the less we do, and the worse we feel in turn. Luckily, many symptoms associated with depression can be reduced by introducing activities. If we are to act opposite to the sadness drive, when we notice sadness, we would instead get active, do pleasant activities, spend time with others. We expect practicing these activities to increase positive mood in the moment, and over the long-term, to have a cumulative positive effect on mood and symptoms.

There are five main ways teachers can help kids with acting opposite.

1. **'Psychoeducation'** – fostering understanding of why low mood and low activity are related.
2. **Identifying enjoyed activities.** Many lists of pleasant activities are readily available on the internet, and a great starting point can be identifying activities kids used to enjoy or currently enjoy.
3. **Goal setting.** Teachers can help kids set reasonable, meaningful, and feasible goals for themselves. This means starting with goals that are much smaller than what they think they can commit to and anticipating and

problem-solving any barriers. This step is key as it helps to set kids up for success and mitigates disappointment and demoralization when low mood makes doing the activity harder than expected.

#### 4. Practicing opposite action in the classroom.

This is essential: doing activities when sad is easier said than done and is a big reason why practicing this skill in classrooms first in more neutral moods provides a 'training ground' for tougher situations and for doing opposite action independently.

5. **Checking in on goals** and providing support and encouragement can help motivate kids, especially in the beginning when creating new habits is the toughest.

### Behavior 'experiments'

We can frame 'acting opposite' to kids as doing a 'behavior experiment', in which we test out the effect of this practice.

#### In the classroom

1. Make a mood rating scale or find one online to rate mood, e.g. a rating scale that goes from 0-10 with 0 representing 'worst mood', 5 'OK mood', and 10 'best mood'. Have kids identify examples of when they are in various mood states.
2. Pick an activity for the experiment. Six basic activity categories include:
  - a. Doing something enjoyable (pleasant activities)
  - b. Helping others (service activities)
  - c. Learning new things or doing things that give us a sense of achievement (mastery activities)

- d. Doing things with people (social activities)
  - e. Doing something to take care of ourselves so we can be healthy (self-care activities)
  - f. Moving our bodies (physical activities).
  - g. Note: It's easiest to start with a pleasant activity or physical activity for the classroom. That might involve eating a small treat like a berry or chocolate chip, watching a cute animal video, or doing jumping jacks.
3. Rate mood before the experiment.
  4. Do the activity.
  5. Rate mood again after
  6. Discuss what kids' noticed, and whether this was different than what they expected.

#### At-home practice

- Make a list of enjoyed activities: Are there things you do because they feel good or because they are important or personally meaningful to you? Can you think of activities that sometimes change your emotions? One thing to help you identify activities is to ask yourself: If I had a day off school, what would I do?
- Try at least twice this week to change your emotional state when you are feeling sad or upset by doing an activity that is meaningful and not in line with what the emotion is telling you to do.
- Track your activity and emotional experience to see if this experiment helps you to feel good this week. Use the mood rating scale to rate your mood before and after.



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