

Make Every Session Count: A Coping Skills Manual

Doing "Homework" That Heals



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Doing "Homework" That Heals

THERE ARE SEVERAL easy things you can do between sessions that can help speed up the process of therapy. It's "homework"—but you won't be graded. These simple strategies have been developed, tested, and found to be quite helpful for people going through a wide array of difficult times. Let's take a look at six specific "homework" strategies.

What Works and What Doesn't

Often during times of stress, people conclude, "Nothing I do seems to help." Most times this statement is only partially true.

Jim and Mary come to a brief therapy session and continue to talk about marital problems. They just told the therapist that "We had a bad week." The therapist listened to the details, and at some point asked, "Were there any good times during the past week?" The couple said, "Yes...Saturday was pretty good."

You can look at this kind of situation and simply think, "Well, it was nice to have at least one good day"... and then, just forget about it. An alternative, however, is to think, " *Why* was it a good day? Could I have *two* good days next week?"

The therapist encouraged Jim and Mary to think carefully about Saturday, and try to discover any clues as to why things went well. Mary said, "Saturday, Jim saw that I was overwhelmed with the kids and he came up to me and said, 'Let me help out'...That was kinda unique for him to say something like this, and I think it set the tone for the whole day. I really appreciated it."

When Jim confirmed the story, the therapist said, "I have a suggestion. We've focused a lot on problems and what doesn't work. But you've just told me that there really are times when the two of you can have a good day. I think it would be helpful to start paying attention to the good times. When you feel good about each other or you feel close, sit down and think, 'What made this possible?...What did I say or do, what did she say or do that really made a difference?' And write it down in a notebook. I know there are some serious problems in your relationship,

but there may be some solutions there too. Your homework assignment is to start noting those more positive times and start keeping a notebook—jotting down things that help and things that work. I think it'll help. Are you willing to give it a try?"

Many people discover to their surprise that there are some things they already do that succeed in reducing distress or minimizing conflicts. These are strengths you can build on!

Psychiatrist Gordon Deckert also suggests a simple and straightforward idea. When you keep trying to deal with a recurring problem in a particular way, and it doesn't work, stop and take a close look at what you're doing (that doesn't work) and at the very least, just don't do *that!* Most of us are creatures of habit and it's normal to do things in the "usual way"—even when the evidence is abundant that it doesn't work!

Mike gives us another example. Whenever he had a frustrating week he'd feel depressed, discouraged, and hopeless. His usual solution was to shut himself away in his apartment all weekend...not going outside and not having contact with others. His therapist asked him if this "solution" was helpful.

Mike replied, "I don't feel like doing anything but hiding out at home all weekend, but I guess it doesn't help much...By Sunday night I usually feel worse."

His therapist inquired, "Have there ever been times when you were feeling down, but you *didn't* lock yourself away in your apartment?" Mike answered, "Yes...on occasion." He went on to elaborate about these rare occasions when he didn't feel like going out, but he forced himself to leave his apartment and go to the mall, or to the park, or bowling with a friend. And most times it helped him feel somewhat better.

The best way to approach this is to look carefully at what you do when times are difficult (maybe even write it down on paper) and then ask yourself "Does this help me? Is it a good solution?" Some solutions aren't chosen; they feel automatic. And some solutions backfire; they either don't help or even make things feel worse. You do have choices. Take action! Even if you can't invent a great solution, at least stop doing things that don't work.

Positive Activity Diary

Annie is a thirty-five-year-old woman who came to brief therapy complaining of depression: "I can't get

anything accomplished. I'm at home all day with the kids. By the time my husband gets home, the house is a wreck. I look at my house and think, "What's wrong with me?" I don't even work. I'm just a housewife and I can't get anything done. I feel out of control of my whole life!" She considered herself an inadequate mother and housekeeper, who "does nothing productive." Since Annie has three children, ages one, two, and four, it was hard for her therapist to believe her statements, "I don't even work," and "I can't get anything done."

The therapist asked Annie to start keeping an *activity diary*, at least for one day. He asked her to write down *everything* she did, even small things like picking up a toy or getting a drink for one of her children. She brought to the next session a small notebook with many pages filled. She said, "I can't believe it. As I was writing everything down, it hit me. I'm continuously busy from morning 'til night. In fact, it was hard to keep up with the writing...I know I missed some things. Maybe my house looks like a wreck, but at least I know that I'm working my butt off. I *am* getting a lot done each day."

Especially if you feel overwhelmed or depressed, it's easy to overlook or minimize your accomplishments. At the end of the day you may conclude, "The day was wasted. I got nothing done." This perception lowers self-esteem and brings on a sense of defeat. An activity diary can help present a realistic view of events.

There are two ways you can do this. First, *write down every single activity*, as Annie did. This does take some time and is not practical for most of us on a regular basis. Still, doing it for a day or two can be helpful, as it was for Annie. A practical approach for use on a daily basis is to *record the major events* of each day: *tasks completed* (or progress made toward completion); *positive events* (receiving a compliment, pampering yourself with a hot bubble bath, having a nice lunch with a friend, getting a letter, feeling good about a job well done); and *experiences* that matter to you (spending time with your child, gardening, writing a letter to a friend, saying a prayer).

This process works best if you keep it simple and easy. It is best to jot down only brief three-to-five-word statements. Then, review the list at the end of the day. Even very distressed people who feel as though they accomplished absolutely nothing in a day are often surprised to find out that in fact they've done many things and experience some moments of pleasure. This approach is easy to put into action and can give immediate payoffs. It's an important way to avoid feelings of helplessness and low self-esteem.

Mood-Rating Chart

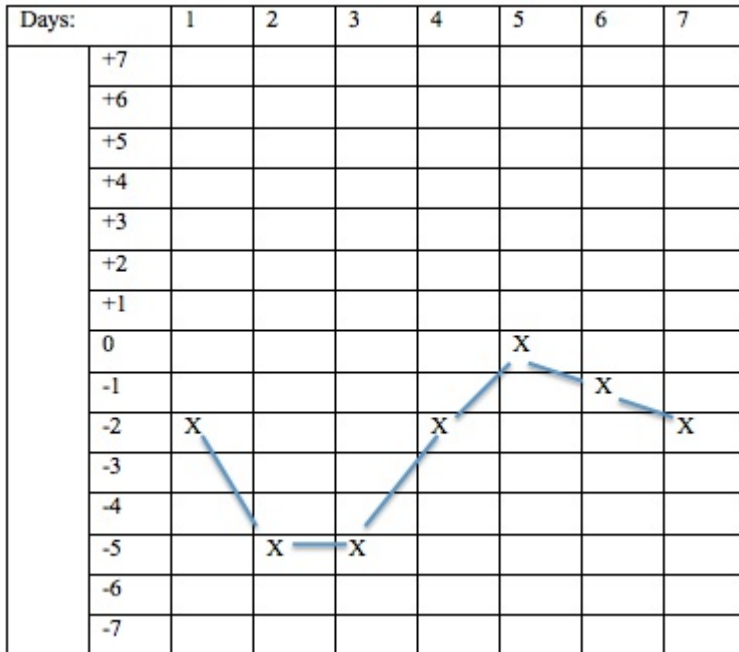
People who are under tremendous stress commonly look back over a period of time and remember primarily the negative feelings and events. They tend to conclude, "I've had an awful week. Everything went wrong, the whole week was terrible." This type of memory (which accentuates unpleasant experiences) can actually make stress worse. Believing that nothing positive happens in your life, or that you are always extremely depressed, can result in increased feelings of despair and pessimism. The fact is that *even very stressed people are not 100 percent distressed all of the time*. Even during very hard times people experience ups and downs. A person's mood is almost never completely stable. It is important and helpful to have an accurate and realistic perception of your moods and to be able to monitor changes in mood over time. An effective way to accomplish this is to use a *daily mood rating chart*. A number of studies have demonstrated that simply tracking and rating your moods on a daily basis has the effect of decreasing stress. At first glance this might seem absurd but let's look at this approach and understand how keeping track can help.

The use of a mood rating chart is simple. Take a look at the sample chart. (Feel free to make copies of this chart for your personal use.) Place a copy of the chart on your bedside table, and each night take a few moments to review the day. Ask yourself: "Overall, how did I feel today?" and then rate your feelings on a scale of plus 7 (extremely happy day) to minus 7 (extremely unhappy day). Most people will notice that there is a good deal of change in mood from day to day.

Daniel is a forty-two-year-old college professor who has been experiencing painful depressive symptoms since his wife asked him for a divorce a month ago. During his first therapy session he said, "Every single day, I feel paralyzed with depression. I have no energy, no motivation, and no happiness." During the next week he completed a daily mood rating chart and brought it in to the next session. In looking at this chart, he commented, "There were several days when I felt extremely depressed, but now looking back over the week, there were a couple of days that were not terrible, and most of the time I was not at rock bottom." This chart was helpful for him in two ways. First, it helped him remember more accurately and realistically how he was feeling. He soon realized that his depression, while certainly a painful experience, was not 100 percent pervasive. This acknowledgment helped to inspire hope, and left him feeling not quite so powerless. Second, he was able to use the chart over a period of two months to monitor his recovery from depression. After eight weeks of therapy, he said, "I've been noticing that gradually, over the past weeks, more and more of my days are good days. I still get discouraged and have some crummy days, but

there definitely is a positive trend. I am feeling better."

Daily Mood Rating Chart – Daniel



Keeping Perspective

Another homework project you may find helpful is to make a list of "things that matter." In the midst of hard times, it's easy to focus mainly on bad stuff, and to lose sign of positive aspects of life. Our college professor, Daniel, made the following list:

Things That Matter to Me

1. My relationship with my kids
2. My teaching job and how I have an impact on my students

3. My involvement in church and our fund-raising activities
4. Reading exciting novels
5. Listening to rock and roll music
6. Sailing
7. Exercising at the YMCA
8. Talking to my sister on the phone
9. Writing or calling old friends
10. Driving in the country on a sunny weekend afternoon
11. The fact that I am a decent person and a good father
12. My sense of humor

Daniel wrote this list on a piece of paper, taped it to his bathroom mirror, and on the bottom in red ink wrote: "Dan— Don't forget these things. They are important!" His divorce was tough and many days were filled with sadness. But keeping in touch with positive things about himself and remembering to notice those things that matter helped him take it through even really hard days.

The homework activities in this chapter (and others that your therapist may suggest) can be of particular value if you review them with your therapist throughout the course of your brief therapy. The ideas are flexible. Work with your therapist to adapt them to your needs so they will contribute most to your emotional healing.