

Just Do It?

Shifting the balance of approach and avoidance can improve depression

When Nike launched its *Just Do It* campaign in the 1990's the company received a surprising number of letters from people who said the ads helped them make powerful changes in their lives. Some of those letters suggested the slogan had a therapeutic effect on their depression.

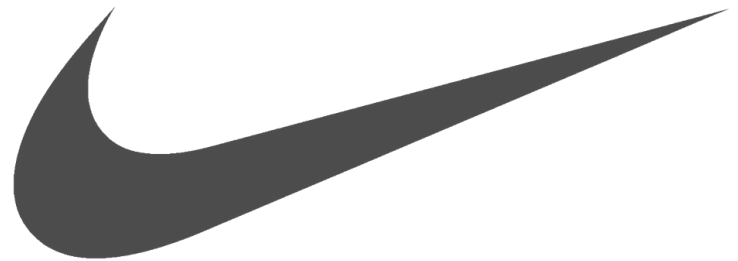
This was probably no surprise to Christopher Martell, a psychologist who was working on a new approach to depression at the time. The therapy he developed, called Behavioral Activation, has since proven to be very effective for depression. It even works in people whose depression is so severe that they have trouble processing and making use of therapy.

The core of the therapy involves reducing avoidance and increasing meaningful action. The idea here is not that avoidance is bad, as we all use avoidance sometimes, but just that depression shifts the balance too heavily towards it. The first step is to recognize the many forms of avoidance. Below are some examples:

Common Avoidance Activities

- Rumination, worry
- Staying in bed
- Staying at home
- Avoiding conflict
- Avoiding risk, challenge, and responsibility
- Putting off jobs
- Avoiding people
- Avoiding promotion at work
- Avoiding evaluation or judgment by others (e.g. tests, exams, interviews)
- Abstract thinking
- Distraction

- Analyzing events over and over for certainty and control
- Reassurance seeking
- Complaining
- Emotional avoidance (blocking or suppressing emotions)



The opposite of avoidance is approach or activation. This type of activity often has a short-term cost (such as anxiety) but a long-term reward (improving depression and quality of life). Below is a list of common approach behaviors; start with small, easy ones and try to increase their frequency:

Common Approach Activities

- Direct action
- Asking people for help and support
- Being assertive
- Taking risks
- Trying new things
- Making decisions and plans
- Taking on responsibility
- Expressing feelings to others
- Social contact
- Scheduling activities
- Testing things out by trial and error in the world
- Problem solving
- Learning and developing skills
- Allowing oneself to experience feelings
- Staying with details of memories

Nothing difficult is ever easy, and I don't mean to suggest that this simple list, or Nike's three-word slogan, will change depression. This

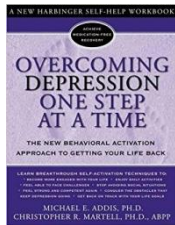
type of work is best taken on with weekly coaching from a therapist.

Read more at:

moodtreatmentcenter.com/activation.pdf

moodtreatmentcenter.com/rumination.pdf

Workbook: *Overcoming Depression One Step at a Time* by Christopher R. Martell and Michael E. Addis



—Chris Aiken, M.D., updated 3/7/2017