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BRIEF: EVIDENCE-INFORMED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH FEELINGS OF BOREDOM, FLATTENED EMOTION & LOW MOTIVATION

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Overview

Feeling bored and unmotivated has been a common experience for many during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. [Barnardo's report](#)), with restrictions limiting what activities (including education, work and socialising) or experiences are possible. While pandemic related restrictions have been in place, some young people described feeling bored, and said being unable to do things that are normally enjoyable was one of the worst things about living within these restrictions (e.g. [GirlGuiding](#) research briefing on the impact of Covid-19).

While they are common feelings, particularly in the pandemic context, difficulties with motivation and boredom can also be associated with depression or low mood (e.g. [Watson et al., 2019](#)). Young people who were already struggling with their mental health pre-pandemic reported that not being able to do things that felt fun or enjoyable made their mental health worse ([Mind report](#)).

This document has been developed in collaboration with clinicians and researchers who bring relevant expertise. It highlights key strategies and recommendations to support young people who are struggling with feeling bored, flat and unmotivated. This information has been written to apply in a general context, with some specific considerations made for the COVID-19 context.

Summary of the key recommendations for young people struggling with feeling bored, flat and unmotivated:

- 1. Be kind to yourself**
- 2. Notice and record time spent on daily activities to see what helps**
- 3. Work out what matters or is important to you**
- 4. Do more of what matters**
- 5. When feeling unmotivated, start doing something anyway**
- 6. Notice and pay attention to how it feels to do what you are doing**
- 7. Imagine positive future images in detail and imagine the steps needed to get there**
- 8. Try to notice and address any negative 'self-talk' that is getting in the way of enjoyment or motivation**
- 9. Make a commitment to others**
- 10. Seek help when it is needed**

Recommendations

1. Be kind to yourself

Remember lots of people are feeling bored, flat and unmotivated during the pandemic. Everyone is having to adapt to new routines and changes to their daily lives, which has often left people feeling bored, flat and unmotivated. Try not to judge yourself if/when you are feeling this way. Instead, just notice and observe what you are feeling (e.g. feeling bored), and remember it's okay and understandable to feel that way.

2. Notice and record time spent on daily activities to see what helps

Monitoring how your time is being spent can help you to identify opportunities to do more enjoyable and valued (see point 3) activities. It can be particularly easy to feel bored and unmotivated when time is not broken up easily into discrete chunks for us (e.g. by being at school vs. home). Noting down how time is being spent can help people to notice the things that they are already doing which are fun, enjoyable, or rewarding. Once you have noticed the things that seem to make you feel good, try to schedule in more of them to your daily routine.

It can be helpful to write out your plans, goals and values so you can get back to them when feeling unmotivated.

3. Work out what matters or is important to you (i.e. *what are your values?*)

Identify personal values: what matters to you, what are your *values*? Values are the things that matter to the individual, not what matters to other people like family, friends or teachers. Values are different to goals. A value is what a person finds important, what they believe matters in life, what guides the direction they want to go and what they want to get out of life.

Values are different for everyone, but they tend to fall into different types. As well as relationships with *people that matter* (i.e. family, friends, neighbours, romantic partners), other common values include *looking after yourself* (i.e. health, being physically active, sleeping well, eating well, pampering, looking good), and *wider things that matter* (i.e. school / education, community, religion, environmental or 'green' issues, equal rights etc).

Try to focus on identifying 'intrinsic' values (e.g. having close relationships) rather than 'extrinsic' values (e.g. being popular). Intrinsic motivation involves doing something

because it's personally rewarding to you. Extrinsic motivation involves doing something because you want to earn a reward or avoid punishment. Research has found that intrinsic values like community, close relationships, personal development are linked to a greater sense of wellbeing. However, extrinsic values to do with things like money or physical appearance are not consistently linked to wellbeing. You have choices in how you apply your values, so try to notice and do more of the values that are personally rewarding to you.

Find new ways to connect with others. The COVID-19 pandemic means most people are spending more time at home and with a limited number of people. It might feel harder to find opportunities to connect with *people that matter*, and people might need to do this in different ways from usual, for example, reaching out to a friend to speak virtually to check how they are doing or to play a game online, or spending time helping a sibling with homework. Being able to feel that we have made a positive contribution to someone else's life is great for wellbeing and motivation when we do it because we want to or see the value in it (rather than because we're forced to do it).

4. Do more of what matters (*i.e. do things that are in line with your values*)

Think about what small steps can be taken right now (even if having to stay at home) in the direction of a value. It is important to think about what can still be done that fit with a personal value, even when it is not possible to take part in usual activities. For example, valuing *being active*. Typically, someone might go to the gym, but when this is not possible, this could be replaced with a home work-out or an outdoor run. For someone who values making a difference to the environment they might join an organisation and get involved in online campaigning.

Remember you have a choice about what activities you do that fit with your values. For example, being active, there are lots of options like freely dancing in your room, online cardio video, walking, and outdoor sports.

Plan activities that are in line with these values. Make plans simple and small to start with. Make sure that you make a plan that is achievable, where you know exactly what you will do, and when you will do it. Most importantly make sure it feels relevant, i.e. that you are planning for an activity that fits with your values and may provide a mood boost.

Do valued activities regularly. Try to plan something every day that is in line with your personal values (i.e. something that matters to you).

Talk to others about things that fit with these values. We are all influenced by the people around us, this can help to motivate us towards or away from things. Sharing your values and what activities you plan to do (that are in-line with these values) with others who support you or that share your interests can help motivate both yourself and others. If those people are not

in your current networks, think about how you could reach out to find people that share your interests and values (e.g. through groups, clubs, online networks).

5. When feeling unmotivated, start doing something anyway (*i.e. act despite your feelings*)

Make a start, positive feelings and motivation usually come later. When we are lacking motivation or feeling bored, it is often hard to get started with an activity, and the thought of doing it can be overwhelming. This is quite normal so don't worry – but try to 'just do it anyway'. People find that doing a valued activity, even when they feel like they don't want to at the time is helpful and gets over that feeling of being stuck.

Start with a small step. Doing something when feeling unmotivated can be hard, but everyone has to start somewhere. It can be helpful to think about what steps can be taken to make a task manageable. Then start by focusing on the first step and what you will do in the first few minutes, then see how you feel. Taking small steps towards doing things can make it easier to get going, and once the first step has been made, this may lead to the motivation that is needed to keep going. Although there are limits and restrictions to what can be done at the moment during the pandemic, making these small changes to start with may still help increase levels of motivation. So, for example, start by sending a text to a friend or taking the dog for a short walk. Then build this up bit by bit, for example the next step could be to arrange a weekly call with a friend/group of friends or to walk the dog for slightly longer/more regularly.

Recognise any and all progress. It is important to acknowledge that everyone finds it hard to do things when they don't feel motivated. If an activity has been started and/or enjoyed, recognise this is an achievement to be congratulated. Consider what can be learnt from this going forwards about how to further lift mood and motivation. By focusing more on the process and what you learnt/developed (e.g. improved endurance) rather than just on achieving an end goal (e.g. ran for 5 km) you are likely to feel more motivated to keep going in the long run.

Think about how to tackle any difficulties that you have with engaging in a valued activity. If an activity didn't work out (it was hard to get started, you didn't enjoy it), try and notice what got in the way and think about/write down some ways to do it differently. Maybe making the task shorter or smaller in some way? Or there might be someone who can help? For example, think about what specifically was not liked or enjoyed (*i.e.* although you normally like walks, when you went last time it was wet and dark). Next time, consider checking the weather forecast before going, to see when the best time of day would be and think about what would be best to wear.

6. Notice and pay attention to how it feels to do what you are doing

It is important to try and “get out of your own head” when doing an activity: instead pay attention to everything that is going on around you (e.g. sounds, smells, tastes). Not noticing what is going on around you can mean missing out on fully experiencing the small pleasures and the positive sensations that come from an activity - even if it is a valued activity. For example, when baking some cookies – notice how it *feels* to mix the batter, the *smell* coming from the oven whilst they are cooking, as well as (of course) how they *taste*. Noticing these other sensations can help people to stay focused on the here and now (and not what might be going on in your head). It can increase the ‘feel good’ factor that comes from doing the activity, which means the activity is more likely to be remembered as enjoyable and done again.

It can be helpful to identify and reflect on how it felt to do a valued activity. Thinking and reflecting on how it felt to do an activity can increase feelings of motivation i.e. *wanting* to do this activity again in the future. Reflect on whether the valued activity was *enjoyable*? Was something *achieved*? Did you feel *competent/good* about your abilities? Did it lead to feelings of *closeness*? Was it *useful*? Was it *important*? (whichever apply).

7. Imagine positive future images in lots of detail and imagine the steps needed to get there

Imagining detailed positive future images can help enhance mood and motivation. Mental images can be highly believable and research has shown that they can have a powerful impact on mood. Mental images can be of the past (e.g. memories) and of the future (e.g. imagining an event that might happen). As well as a picture in our minds, positive future images can have lots of other sensory elements (e.g. sounds, smells). The detail in which positive future events are imagined may also help to protect against developing low mood. During the pandemic, it has been hard to make plans for the future. However, try doing this by imagining a positive activity planned for the weekend in lots of detail, such as playing a game online with friends or going for a walk.

Imagine the steps needed to reach to get to the future event. Young people and experts suggest that it is not only helpful to imagine the future event in lots of detail, but also to imagine the steps to get there, navigating obstacles which might be faced along the way. For example, if you were thinking about doing some painting, but had no space on the kitchen table – is there somewhere else you think you could do it (e.g. bedroom)? If you ran out of certain colour paints - could you mix new colours yourself? Planning for how you can find a way round obstacles that might arise can help you to still give it a go, and not give up before you’ve started.

8. Try to notice and address any negative ‘self-talk’ that is getting in the way of enjoyment or motivation (e.g., telling yourself you don’t deserve something)

It is important to check if there is any negative ‘self-talk’ which makes it hard to do things, and stops the positive emotions associated with doing something

fun. For example, this could be thoughts like, “*I don’t deserve this*” “*Others will think I am full of myself*” “*What’s the point, I’m not good at this anyway*”. Try to avoid judgemental language like “*I should*” “*I have to*” “*I ought*”, and instead use words like “*I want*”. Once these negative or judgemental thoughts have been noticed, think about other perspectives that might apply and that will make it easier for you to be motivated or to enjoy things. For example, “*It’s important to look after myself and I want to keep myself well*”.

9. Make a commitment to others

Tell other people what you plan to do. This can help create a feeling of commitment to doing something, which might make it more likely that the activity is started and completed. For example, when planning an activity, tell someone (friend, family, teacher) what the plan is, and ask for encouragement. For example, telling someone about plans to go for a run at 5pm.

Make a plan to do something with someone else. Where possible, get others to join in with an activity. This could be done remotely if it is not possible to do it face to face. For example, it can be helpful to get a friend to join in with an online exercise class or a jog or dog walk in the park.

Engage in activities that make a positive difference to others or the environment. There are lots of ways to take practical steps to make a positive difference in the community. This can help increase feelings of connection with others and the wider world, as well as feeling useful and good about having made a difference.

10. Seek help when it is needed

This briefing has identified specific ways to manage boredom and low motivation. If difficulties are causing distress and/or interfering in daily life, it is important to seek help. Just because these feelings are hard for lots of people doesn’t mean that any single person’s struggles aren’t valid or important. If anyone is struggling at a level where it is getting in the way of daily life (e.g. causing distress, interfering with sleep, schoolwork, concentrating in lessons, socialising with friends), it is important to seek help. This could be talking to a trusted friend or family member. Often a good starting point is to speak to someone at school (a school nurse, school mental health champion); this information can typically be found on the school website or by asking a form tutor. Another option is to speak to a health professional, e.g. GP.

More information on sources of support (and other useful resources) can be found here:
<https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/youth-mental-health/>

Key References:

- **Reynolds, S., & Pass, L. (2020). *Brief Behavioural Activation for Adolescent Depression: A Clinician's Manual and Session-by-Session Guide*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.**

This manual is a step-by-step guide to Brief Behavioural Activation (Brief BA) for practitioners to use this approach with adolescents. Brief BA is a structured intervention which has been shown to be effective for treating adolescents showing symptoms of depression, focusing on helping young people to recover through doing more of what matters to them. The manual contains guidance on how to deliver Brief BA, activities and worksheets for the client and their parents, and information on the research and theory behind the approach. It includes information and advice on how to assess adolescent depression, get to know the young person and their priorities better, and help them to do more of what matters.

- **Dunn, B. D. (2012). *Helping depressed clients reconnect to positive emotion experience: Current insights and future directions*. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 19(4), 326-340. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.1799>**

This article reviews current evidence into the role of anhedonia (a deficit in the ability to experience pleasure) in depression. Key messages from the review include that when treating depression, it is important to focus on promoting positive emotions and experiences as well as attempting to reduce negative feelings. There are many techniques which show potential for improving positive affect in depression, for example activation scheduling, positive data logs, mindfulness, imagery, compassion and memory elaboration techniques.

- **Lewis-Smith, I., Pass, L., & Reynolds, S. (2020). *How adolescents understand their values: A qualitative study*. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104520964506>**

Lewis-Smith et al. (2020) conducted interviews with 11 young people aged 11-17 to explore the understanding and experience of the concept of values. Using values can be a way to encourage behaviour change in psychological therapies. Young people identified: what values are, both in general and more abstract terms (e.g. 'morals', 'what you believe in' and in relation to themselves (e.g. 'my family'; 'being responsible' 'just to be happy'); where values come from (for example, being influenced by their family, their peers and their education) and finally why values are important in helping to prioritise and make decisions and as a way of providing hope and motivation in difficult circumstances. Findings from this study suggest that young people are able to and enjoy talking about their values.

- **Tindall, L., Mikocka-Walus, A., McMillan, D., Wright, B., Hewitt, C., & Gascoyne, S. (2017). *Is behavioural activation effective in the treatment of depression in young people? A systematic review and meta-analysis*. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 90(4), 770-796. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papt.12121>**

This is a systematic review and meta-analysis into the effectiveness of behavioural activation (BA) as a treatment for depression in young people. Ten studies were examined, and it was found that BA may be effective in the treatment of depression in young people. However, despite this, the review found that the included studies had methodological problems such as small sample sizes and limited outcome measures. This means that the results of the studies should be interpreted with caution and more research into this area is needed.

- **Pile, V., Smith, P., Leamy, M., Oliver, A., Blackwell, S. E., Meiser-Stedman, R., ... & Lau, J. Y. (2020). Harnessing Mental Imagery and Enhancing Memory Specificity: Developing a Brief Early Intervention for Depressive Symptoms in Adolescence. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10608-020-10130-3>**

Pile et al. (2020) explored the use of imagery-based interventions for depressive symptoms in adolescents. Imagery-based interventions target underlying cognitive mechanisms, such as dysfunctional mental imagery and over-general memory, which are thought to contribute to depressive symptoms. The intervention comprised imagery rescripting to reduce the distress associated with a negative image and to build a positive future image and memory specificity training to increase specificity and access to memories. The intervention also includes discussion of the young person's values and recording something positive that has happened to them that day. The intervention was conducted over four sessions. Questionnaires and experimental tasks to assess cognitive mechanisms and symptoms of anxiety and depression were completed pre- and post-intervention, as well as 3 months after the intervention. Results showed that there was a large reduction in depression symptoms from pre to post intervention, and anxiety levels also reduced. Self-esteem and memory specificity also improved. This suggests that mental imagery and memory specificity might be important concepts to target in psychological therapy for adolescents with depression.

- **Pile, V., & Lau, J. Y. (2018). Looking forward to the future: impoverished vividness for positive prospective events characterises low mood in adolescence. *Journal of affective disorders*, 238, 269-276. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2018.05.032>**

This study investigated whether impaired vividness for positive prospective events characterised depression in adolescents and whether negative life events moderated this relationship. Three hundred and seventy-five young people aged 11-16 completed the Prospective Imagery Task, self-reported symptoms of anxiety and depression and described a past negative life events they had been thinking about/imagining over the past week. Results showed that symptoms of depression were associated with less vivid positive imagery and more vivid imagery. Those who had less vividness for images of positive future events were more likely to have symptoms of depression if they had experienced a negative life event than those with more vivid images for positive future events. These findings suggest that increasing vividness of images of future positive events could be included in treatments of adolescent depression.

- **Dunn BD, Burr L, Bunker-Smith H, Hunt A, Dadgostar D, Dalglish L, Smith S, Attree E, Jell G, Martyn J, et al (2018). Turning gold into lead: Dampening appraisals reduce happiness and pleasantness and increase sadness during anticipation and recall of pleasant activities in the laboratory. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 107, 19-33. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2018.05.003>**

This lab study investigated the role of changing appraisals when remembering and anticipating positive events. Firstly, participants completed a positive recall/anticipation task before then either being assigned to a control, dampening appraisal (e.g. thinking 'this is too good to last') or amplifying appraisal (e.g. thinking 'I deserve this') during a second positive recall/anticipation task. Results of the study found that participants in the dampening condition had lower levels of happiness and pleasure and increased in sadness relative to the control condition. This finding suggests that if an individual engages in dampening appraisals (as might be the case in individuals with depression) then recalling a positive memory and anticipating a positive future event might turn into an active negative mood induction. This means that noticing, challenging and letting go of dampening appraisals might need to part of therapy for depression, in order to enhance the effectiveness of therapeutic tools such as positive activity scheduling.

- **Pass, L., Brisco, G., & Reynolds, S. (2015). Adapting brief Behavioural Activation (BA) for adolescent depression: a case example. *The Cognitive Behaviour Therapist*, 8.** <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1754470X15000446>

This article reports on adapting a brief form of behavioural activation treatment for depression for use with adolescents (Brief BA). Exploration and identification of personal values is an important part of this, especially considering the young person's own values, rather than those imposed on them by other people (e.g. parents, teachers, peers). Engaging parental support, where possible, is important, alongside promoting the young person's autonomy and individuality. This can be achieved by providing clear information about what happens in the sessions and including parents in some sessions. The article concludes that brief BA may be an appropriate low intensity intervention for young people who have depressive symptoms, but do not meet criteria for CAMHS.

- **Dunn BD, Widnall E, Reed N, Owens C, Campbell J, Kuyken W (2019). Bringing light into darkness: a multiple baseline mixed methods case series evaluation of Augmented Depression Therapy (ADepT). *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 120, 103418-103418.** <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2019.103418>

This study evaluated the use of Augmented Depression Therapy (ADepT) that aims to reduce depression and enhance wellbeing. The focus of the therapy is to target the negative valence system and positive valence system. This is a new approach to treating depression, as typically treatments focus only on the negative valence system. Eleven clinically depressed participants took part in the intervention, which consisted of up to 15 treatment sessions and up to 5 optional booster sessions with a therapist. Results of the intervention were that 7/11 participants improved on wellbeing and depression and reliable and clinically significant improvement was observed for 9/11 participants on at least one of these outcomes (as well as across other positive valence system and negative valence system outcomes) and were mainly sustained over a one-year follow-up. Interviews with participants also suggested that ADepT was feasible and acceptable as a treatment. Taken together, these results provide initial support for ADepT as a novel depression treatment.

- **Watson, R., Harvey, K., Pass, L., McCabe, C., & Reynolds, S. (2020). A qualitative study exploring adolescents' experience of brief behavioural activation for depression and its impact on the symptom of anhedonia. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*.** <https://doi.org/10.1111/papt.12307>

This study explores the experience of adolescents with a diagnosis of depression who had received Brief Behavioural Activation for depression. Eight adolescents were interviewed. Three main themes which emerged from the interviews. The first theme was connecting, reviewing and taking action- there were specific strategies which helped young people to improve their mood and increase their levels of enjoyment and motivation, such as connecting with what was important to them (their values), actively reviewing their feelings and behaviours and reviewing the link between their feelings and behaviours before taking a structured, goal orientated approach to change. The second theme was struggles, restrictors and motivators- there were a number of barriers to engaging in treatment, such as struggling to get past low motivation and fatigue and being restricted by academic pressures. Feeling encouraged and motivated by others helped young people to engage in treatment. The final theme was feeling, acting or seeing things differently- most focused on positive changes such as experiencing enjoyment, excitement and optimism, feeling motivated and engaged, however some experienced a lack of change/ short-lived change in anhedonia or an increase in anxiety as anhedonia subsides. The implications of this research are that it suggests that both specific strategies, such as connecting with their values, and more generic strategies, such as self-monitoring, are important for enhancing mood and motivation.

- **Ames (1992). Classrooms: Goals, Structures & Student Motivation. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 84, 261 – 271.**

This article examines the classroom learning environment in relation to the achievement goal theory of motivation. It describes the difference between mastery and performance goals. Mastery goals focus on the process, learning experience and efforts, whereas performance goals focus on the end-task/result. The emphasis of performance goals is often on competition and doing better at a particular activity than other people.

- **Lekes et al. (2010). Parental Autonomy-Support, Intrinsic Life Goals, and Well-Being Among Adolescents in China and North America. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 39, 58–869. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-009-9451-7>**

Self-determination theory proposes that prioritizing intrinsic life goals, such as community involvement, is related to well-being, whereas focusing on extrinsic life goals, such as financial success, is associated with lower well-being. The theory also suggests that parents can influence the types of goals young people think of as important. Across societies, when parents supported the autonomy of their child (e.g. gave their child choices, acknowledged their perspective and encourage them to take initiative), young people were more likely to value intrinsic life goals, which in turn was associated with well-being of the young people. These findings suggest that, cross-culturally, prioritizing intrinsic life goals is related to increased well-being among adolescents and that parents could encourage intrinsic life goals by being supportive of their children’s autonomy.

- **Knittle et al (2020). The compendium of self-enactable techniques to change and self-manage motivation and behaviour. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 4, 215–223. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0798-9>**

This paper describes the development of a collection of techniques that individuals can do to change their behaviour and increase their motivation. There are 123 techniques, described, which give examples of how an individual can apply the techniques to their life.

General guidelines for developing resources to support young people:

Content

- Keep the tone **informal, conversational** and **direct**
- Content needs to be **accessible**, so not too academic or long
- Include **authentic youth voice** – incorporate young people’s experiences and real-life stories
- Include **practical** and **tangible** advice
- Include onward **signposting** from reliable sources

Format

- Video resources should be a) **short and snappy**, and b) on topics that can be shared on social media
- Written resources should be **600-800 words maximum** with headers and sub headers to **break up the text** into theme
- Consider having **social media** content prepared to share alongside any resources that sit on specific websites as an effective way to steer young people towards the resources
- Resource needs to reach young people through **existing networks**