




WORKBOOK

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*Strategies for Thriving
with Seasonal
Affective Disorder
(SAD)*

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Greetings! My name is Caroline and I am a licensed social worker and therapist located in New Jersey. I have over 10 years of experience in the mental health field and am here to help you on your wellness journey. The following workbook is a comprehensive guide to thriving with Seasonal Affective Disorder, formerly known as seasonal depression. As it gets darker earlier and colder outside, we need to learn new coping skills and ways to adapt to our changing environments and moods.

This workbook is not a substitution for mental health services and should be shared with a licensed therapist or counselor.



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Understanding Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that occurs at a specific time of the year, typically during the fall and winter months when there is less natural sunlight.

SAD symptoms are similar to those of major depressive disorder and may include feelings of sadness, hopelessness, fatigue, and irritability. Other common symptoms are changes in sleep patterns, appetite, and concentration.

SAD follows a seasonal pattern, with symptoms typically starting in the late fall or early winter and improving in the spring and summer.

The exact cause of SAD is not fully understood, but it is believed to be related to a combination of factors, including reduced sunlight exposure, changes in circadian rhythms, and genetic predisposition.

SAD symptoms tend to recur at the same time each year, but they usually improve or disappear with the change of seasons.

It's important to seek treatment if symptoms are severe or significantly impact daily functioning.

SAD Self-Assessment

A self-assessment for Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) can help you to recognize potential symptoms and assess your risk for experiencing SAD. Keep in mind that while self-assessments can be informative, they are not a substitute for a professional diagnosis. If you suspect you have SAD or are experiencing distressing symptoms, it's important to consult with a healthcare provider or mental health professional.

Please read the following statements and rate how often each statement applies to your experiences during specific seasons, especially fall and winter. Use a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being "Never" and 5 being "Always."

1. I feel significantly more depressed or down during the fall and winter months.

- 1 (Never)
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 (Always)

2. I have noticed a decrease in my energy levels during the fall and winter.

- 1 (Never)
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 (Always)

3. My sleep patterns change in the fall and winter, and I tend to sleep more than usual.

- 1 (Never)
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 (Always)

4. I experience significant weight gain or increased appetite during the fall and winter.

- 1 (Never)
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 (Always)

5. I have difficulty concentrating or focusing on tasks during the fall and winter.

- 1 (Never)
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 (Always)

6. My interest in social activities and hobbies decreases in the fall and winter.

- 1 (Never)
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 (Always)

7. I find it challenging to wake up in the morning and get out of bed during the fall and winter.

- 1 (Never)
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 (Always)

8. I feel more irritable and anxious during the fall and winter months.

- 1 (Never)
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 (Always)

9. I have a strong craving for carbohydrates, such as sweets and starchy foods, during the fall and winter.

- 1 (Never)
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 (Always)

10. I have experienced the symptoms described above for two or more consecutive years during the same seasons.

- 1 (Never)
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 (Always)

Scoring:

- Total your scores for all the items.

- A higher score indicates a higher likelihood of Seasonal Affective Disorder. Consulting with a healthcare professional is essential for an accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment if needed.



Light Therapy


Please consult a medical professional before trying light therapy

Light therapy, also known as phototherapy, is a common and effective treatment for SAD and other mood disorders related to changes in light exposure.

*Light therapy involves **exposure to a bright light source** that mimics natural sunlight. The light is typically emitted at a specific intensity and spectrum (usually in the blue and white light range) to effectively stimulate the receptors in the eyes, which then influence the body's internal clock (circadian rhythm) and neurotransmitter production, such as serotonin.*

*Light therapy sessions **typically last between 20 to 60 minutes**, depending on the specific device and individual needs. The timing of light exposure is crucial. For SAD, it is often recommended to undergo light therapy in the morning to help reset the circadian rhythm and improve mood.*

*The most common device used for light therapy is a **lightbox**. These boxes are designed to emit high-intensity light and are available in various sizes and intensities. It's essential to choose a lightbox that meets recommended specifications and is approved for the treatment of SAD.*



Light Therapy continued

*During a light therapy session, the individual typically **sits or works near the lightbox**, with the light source positioned above eye level. It's important not to stare directly into the light but rather to let it enter the eyes naturally while engaging in normal activities such as reading, working on a computer, or eating breakfast.*

*Light therapy is most effective when **used consistently**. Individuals often need to undergo daily sessions, ideally at the same time each day, for several weeks or until their SAD symptoms improve. Some people may continue using light therapy throughout the entire season when they experience symptoms.*

*Before starting light therapy, **it is advisable to consult with a healthcare provider**, preferably one with experience in treating SAD. They can help determine the appropriate treatment plan, including the right intensity and duration of light exposure.*

*Once SAD symptoms improve, some individuals may benefit from continuing light therapy at a **reduced frequency** to prevent symptom recurrence in subsequent seasons.*

*Light therapy can be an effective and non-invasive treatment option for individuals with Seasonal Affective Disorder. However, it's crucial to use light therapy under the **guidance of a healthcare provider** to ensure safe and effective treatment.*

SAD Sleep Hygiene



Sleep hygiene is essential for individuals with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) because disrupted sleep patterns can make depressive symptoms worsen.

- 1. Maintain a Regular Sleep Schedule:** Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, even on weekends. Consistency helps regulate your body's internal clock.*
- 2. Exposure to Natural Light:** Maximize your exposure to natural sunlight during the day, especially in the morning. Open curtains, go for a walk, or spend time outdoors to help regulate your circadian rhythm.*
- 3. Limit Artificial Light at Night:** In the evening, reduce exposure to bright screens (e.g., phones, tablets, computers) and artificial lighting. The blue light emitted by screens can disrupt your sleep-wake cycle.*
- 4. Create a Relaxing Bedtime Routine:** Develop a calming routine before bedtime to signal to your body that it's time to wind down. This may include activities like reading, taking a warm bath, or practicing relaxation exercises.*
- 5. Control the Sleep Environment:** Keep the room dark, quiet, and at a comfortable temperature. Consider using blackout curtains if necessary.*

SAD Sleep Hygiene continued



- 6. **Limit Stimulants:** Avoid caffeine and nicotine in the hours leading up to bedtime, as these substances can interfere with sleep. Alcohol should also be consumed in moderation, as it can disrupt sleep patterns.*
- 7. **Regular Exercise:** Engage in regular physical activity, but try to avoid vigorous exercise close to bedtime. Exercise can help improve mood and sleep quality.*
- 8. **Limit Naps:** If you need to nap during the day, keep it short (20-30 minutes) and earlier in the day to avoid interfering with nighttime sleep.*
- 9. **Be Mindful of Your Food Choices:** Heavy or spicy meals can lead to discomfort and disrupt sleep. Consider having a light, balanced snack if you're hungry.*
- 10. **Manage Stress:** Practice stress-reduction techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, or progressive muscle relaxation to help manage symptoms of SAD and reduce nighttime anxiety. See our other sections for more ideas on how to reduce stress!*

Remember that establishing good sleep hygiene habits takes time and patience. It's essential to be consistent with these practices to improve your sleep quality and overall well-being, especially during the fall and winter months when you experience more SAD symptoms. If sleep problems persist despite following these tips, consider consulting with a healthcare provider for additional guidance and support

Basic Calming Breathing Techniques



Deep Belly Breathing (Diaphragmatic Breathing)

Purpose: This technique helps reduce stress and anxiety by promoting relaxation and activating the body's relaxation response.

- 1. Find a quiet and comfortable place to sit or lie down.*
- 2. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen, just below your ribcage.*
- 3. Close your eyes and take a slow, deep breath in through your nose, allowing your abdomen to rise as you fill your lungs with air.*
- 4. Exhale slowly and completely through your mouth, letting go of any tension or stress with each breath.*
- 5. Continue this deep breathing pattern, focusing on the rise and fall of your abdomen, for several minutes or until you feel more relaxed.*

4-7-8 Breathing (Relaxing Breath)

Purpose: This technique can help calm the nervous system and reduce anxiety.

Steps:

- 1. Sit or lie down in a comfortable position.*
- 2. Close your eyes and take a deep breath in through your nose to the count of 4 seconds.*
- 3. Hold your breath for a count of 7 seconds.*
- 4. Exhale slowly and completely through your mouth for a count of 8 seconds.*
- 5. Repeat this cycle for three to four breaths initially, gradually working your way up to several cycles as you become more comfortable with the technique.*

Box Breathing (Square Breathing)

Purpose: Box breathing is a technique to regain focus, reduce stress, and promote a sense of calm.

Steps:

- 1. Sit in a comfortable position with your back straight.*
- 2. Close your eyes and take a slow, deep breath in through your nose, counting to 4 seconds.*
- 3. Hold your breath for a count of 4 seconds.*
- 4. Exhale slowly and completely through your mouth for a count of 4 seconds.*
- 5. Pause and hold your breath for another 4 seconds before starting the cycle again.*
- 6. Continue this box breathing pattern for several cycles, maintaining a steady and rhythmic pace.*

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

PMR is a relaxation technique that can be helpful for individuals with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) to manage stress and reduce muscle tension.

Find a quiet and comfortable place to sit or lie down. Close your eyes, take a deep breath in, and exhale slowly. Allow yourself to let go of any stress or tension you may be feeling right now.

We'll begin by tensing and then relaxing specific muscle groups in your body, one at a time. As we do this, focus your attention on the sensations of tension and relaxation. Remember to breathe calmly and naturally throughout the exercise.

1. Hands

- *Clench your fists tightly, squeezing your fingers together.*
- *Hold for a count of 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...*
- *Now, release your fists and let your hands completely relax.*
- *Feel the tension melting away.*

2. Forearms

- *Tighten the muscles in your forearms by flexing them.*
- *Hold for a count of 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...*
- *Now, release the tension in your forearms, allowing them to go limp.*

3. Upper Arms

- *Flex the muscles in your upper arms, making them as tight as you can.*
- *Hold for a count of 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...*
- *Now, release the tension in your upper arms, letting them become loose and relaxed.*

4. Shoulders

- *Raise your shoulders up towards your ears, creating tension.*
- *Hold for a count of 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...*
- *Let your shoulders drop down as you release the tension. Feel them sinking into relaxation.*

5. Neck

- *Gently tilt your head backward, stretching the muscles in your neck.*
- *Hold for a count of 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...*
- *Slowly return your head to its natural position, letting go of any remaining tension.*

6. Face

- *Scrunch up your facial muscles, squinting your eyes and clenching your jaw.*
- *Hold for a count of 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...*
- *Now, relax your face completely. Let go of any tightness in your forehead, cheeks, and jaw.*

PMR Continued

7. Chest and Back

- *Take a deep breath in, filling your chest with air.*
- *Hold for a count of 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...*
- *Exhale slowly, releasing any tension in your chest and back.*

8. Abdomen

- *Tighten your abdominal muscles by drawing your belly button toward your spine.*
- *Hold for a count of 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...*
- *Let go of the tension in your abdomen, allowing your breath to flow naturally.*

9. Thighs

- *Tighten the muscles in your thighs by squeezing them together.*
- *Hold for a count of 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...*
- *Release the tension in your thighs, feeling them become heavy and relaxed.*

10. Calves

- *Flex your calf muscles, pointing your toes upward.*
- *Hold for a count of 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...*
- *Let your calves relax, and feel the tension melt away.*

11. Feet:

- *Curl your toes tightly, creating tension in your feet.*
- *Hold for a count of 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...*
- *Finally, release the tension in your toes and let your feet go completely limp.*

Take a moment to notice the sensations of relaxation throughout your body. Feel the warmth and calmness spreading from your head to your toes as you release all the tension.

Stay in this state of relaxation for as long as you like, enjoying the sense of peace and tranquility. When you're ready, slowly open your eyes and return to the present moment, feeling refreshed and rejuvenated.

You can use this Progressive Muscle Relaxation exercise whenever you feel stressed or tense, helping you manage the symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder and promoting relaxation and well-being.

My Safety Plan

This safety plan serves as a vital tool for you to manage and mitigate mental health crises, prevent self-harm or suicide, and promote long-term mental well-being. It combines awareness, support, communication, and personalized strategies to empower you in your mental health journey.

Know When to Get Help

What are the warning signs that you are beginning to struggle with your problem? These can include thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. Examples are: Changes in behavior or mood, increased substance use, suicidal thoughts or behaviors, changes in sleep patterns or appetite, social withdrawal, and physical symptoms with no clear medical cause.

Use Coping Skills

What can you do, by yourself, to take your mind off the problem?

Examples include: Mindfulness and relaxation techniques like deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation, grounding skills like the 5 senses skill, self-soothing, self-care, and distraction like watching a movie, reading a book, or playing a game.

Reach out to Social Support - Name & Phone Number

Safety Plan Continued

Seek Help from Professionals

If your problem persists, or if you have suicidal thoughts, reach out for professional support.

Call 911 for immediate assistance

Local Emergency Number: _____

My mental health provider/therapist: _____

Local crisis center: _____

Talk to someone now

Call the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: 988

- If you are deaf or hard of hearing, call 711 then 988*
- For online chat, visit <https://988lifeline.org/chat>*

Peer Recovery Warmline in New Jersey

(877) 292-5588

This is a peer-run service providing ongoing telephone support to mental health consumers as they work towards their recovery. All calls are answered by peers who are trained, supportive people with lived experience with mental health disorder.

Neurodivergent Friendly SAD Coping Skills

Coping with SAD can be especially challenging for individuals who are neurodivergent, as they may have unique sensory sensitivities and cognitive processing styles. Here are some neurodivergent-specific coping skills for managing SAD:

Create a Sensory-Friendly Environment

Pay attention to sensory triggers that affect you during the winter months. Adjust your environment to minimize sensory overload, such as using soft lighting, noise-cancelling headphones, or weighted blankets for comfort.

Use Visual Schedules

Consider using visual schedules or planners to help you stay organized and structure your day. This can reduce anxiety and provide a sense of predictability during the darker months.

Routine and Predictability

Maintain a consistent daily routine as much as possible. Predictable routines can provide a sense of stability and reduce stress for neurodivergent individuals.

Sensory-Friendly Self-Care

Explore sensory-friendly self-care activities like warm baths with calming scents, fidget toys, or sensory-friendly textures (like soft blankets or stuffed animals) to soothe yourself when needed.

Social Support

Seek out neurodivergent-friendly support groups or online communities where you can connect with others who understand your unique needs and experiences with SAD.

Visual Supports for Light Therapy

If using light therapy, create visual supports or reminders to help you establish a routine. Visual timers or alarms can be particularly useful to signal when it's time for a light therapy session.

Neurodivergent Friendly SAD Coping Skills continued

Mindful Self-Advocacy

Practice self-advocacy by communicating your needs to friends, family, and healthcare providers. Explain how SAD affects you, your neurodivergent traits, and what accommodations or support you require.

Sensory-Friendly Exercise

Engage in sensory-friendly forms of exercise that align with your preferences and sensitivities. This could include activities like swimming, yoga, or nature walks.

Embrace Special Interests

Utilize your special interests as a source of comfort and motivation during the winter months. Dive into activities or hobbies that genuinely engage you and bring joy.

Professional Support

Consider seeking support from a therapist or counselor who specializes in working with neurodivergent individuals. They can help you develop personalized coping strategies for managing SAD.

Remember that coping with SAD as a neurodivergent individual may require a tailored approach that takes into account your specific sensory sensitivities, communication style, and individual needs. Don't hesitate to adapt and experiment with different strategies to find what works best for you while consulting with a mental health professional.

5 Senses Mindfulness Grounding Skill

This is a valuable technique for managing the symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) or any form of depression. It helps you to ground yourself in the present moment by focusing on your sensory experiences.

Find a quiet and comfortable space where you won't be interrupted for a few minutes.

*Look around and notice **five things that you can see**. Describe these objects in detail, noticing colors, shapes, and textures.*

*Listen carefully and identify **four things you can hear**. These could be ambient sounds, like the hum of a refrigerator or distant traffic.*

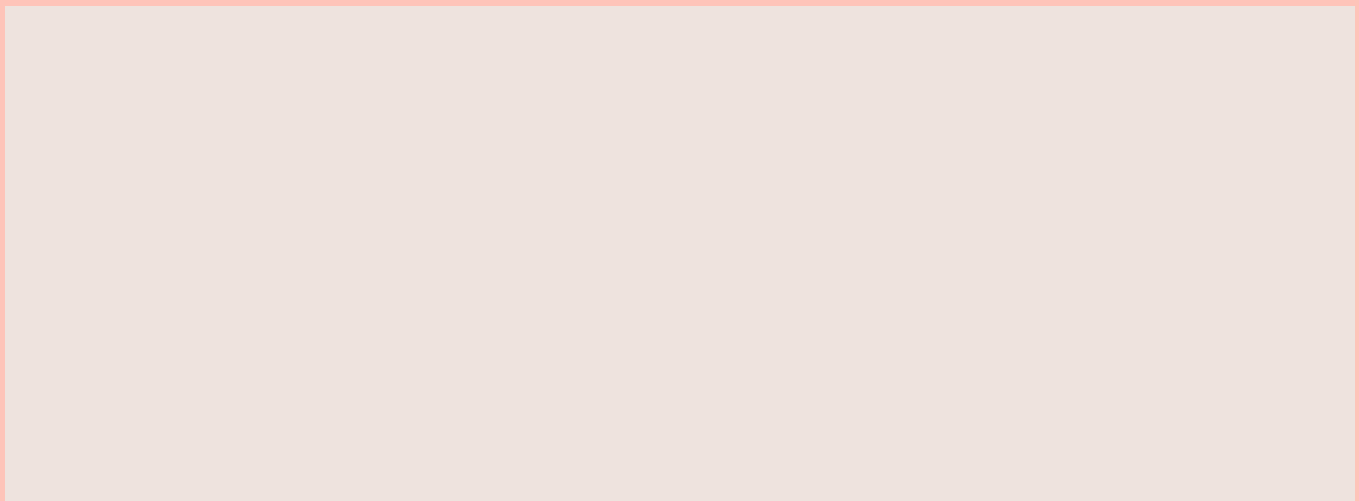
*Pay attention to **three things that you can physically touch**. It might be the texture of your clothing, the warmth of your skin, or the smoothness of a table.*

*Identify **two things that you can taste or anticipate tasting**. It could be a sip of tea, a piece of gum, or simply the taste of saliva in their mouth.*

*Notice **one thing that you can smell**. It could be a nearby flower, a scented candle, or even the aroma of a favorite food.*

Reflect on your experience and how it made you feel.

Did it bring a sense of calm or focus? Did it momentarily alleviate your SAD symptoms?



Incorporate the 5 Senses mindfulness exercise into their daily routine, especially during moments of heightened SAD symptoms or when they feel overwhelmed by depressive thoughts.

SAD Journal Prompts

These specific questions can help you delve deeper into your experiences with Seasonal Affective Disorder, track your progress, and identify strategies for managing symptoms and improving your overall mental health during challenging times of the year.

- 1. How does the changing of seasons, especially the transition into fall and winter, affect your mood and well-being? Are there specific environmental or lifestyle factors that seem to trigger your SAD symptoms?*

- 2. Describe how your SAD symptoms fluctuate during the year. Do you notice any patterns or trends in the severity of your symptoms across different seasons? How do these fluctuations impact your daily life?*

- 3. Reflect on the coping strategies you've used to manage SAD. Which techniques have been most effective in alleviating your symptoms? Are there any new approaches you'd like to explore?*

- 4. What are some self-care practices that you find particularly helpful during the winter months when SAD symptoms are more pronounced? Describe any rituals, activities, or routines that bring you comfort and support your mental health.*

- 5. Despite the challenges of SAD, what goals or aspirations do you have for the winter season? How can you adapt your plans or strategies to accommodate your emotional well-being while still pursuing your objectives?*

Gratitude Prompts

Practicing gratitude can be a powerful tool for individuals with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) to help shift your focus toward positive aspects of life, even during challenging times.

1. Write about something you appreciate or enjoy during the current season, even if you struggle with SAD symptoms. It could be the beauty of winter landscapes, cozy moments by the fireplace, holiday traditions, or the comfort of warm blankets. How does this help you find moments of joy during the colder months?

2. Reflect on the people in your life who provide support and comfort during the SAD season. Write about specific ways they've helped you or made you feel loved. Express gratitude for their presence in your life and consider how you can nurture these relationships.

3. Identify and jot down at least three small, everyday moments that brought you happiness or a sense of contentment. These could be brief encounters, a delicious meal, a kind gesture, or a beautiful sight. Reflect on how these moments brightened your day.

4. Practice self-compassion by listing three things you appreciate about yourself, even when you're struggling with SAD. These can be qualities, skills, or past achievements. Acknowledging your own strengths and positive attributes can boost your self-esteem and resilience.

5. Write about the progress you've made in managing your SAD symptoms, even if it's small steps forward. Celebrate your achievements, no matter how minor they may seem. Reflect on the coping strategies that have been effective for you and express gratitude for your ability to adapt and learn.

CBT Basics

CBT is a goal-oriented, evidence-based therapeutic approach that helps individuals identify and change negative thought patterns, emotions, and behaviors. It is based on the idea that our thoughts influence our feelings and behaviors, and by changing our thought patterns, we can improve our emotional well-being.

Key Concepts of CBT

Automatic Thoughts

CBT emphasizes identifying automatic thoughts—immediate, often subconscious, thoughts that occur in response to situations or events.

Cognitive Distortions

These are biased or irrational thought patterns that contribute to negative emotions and behaviors.

Core Beliefs

CBT explores core beliefs, which are deeply held beliefs about oneself, the world, and the future. These beliefs often underlie automatic thoughts and emotional reactions.

Cognitive Restructuring

This is the process of challenging and changing cognitive distortions through techniques such as examining evidence, considering alternative explanations, and testing beliefs.

Here is a list of common cognitive distortions:

All-or-Nothing Thinking (Black-and-White Thinking): Seeing situations in extreme, either-or terms without considering middle ground or nuances.

Overgeneralization: Drawing broad negative conclusions based on a single negative event.

Mental Filtering: Focusing exclusively on the negative aspects of a situation while ignoring the positive.

Disqualifying the Positive: Rejecting positive experiences or feedback as irrelevant or insignificant.

Jumping to Conclusions:

Mind Reading: Assuming you know what others are thinking and that they view you negatively.

Fortune Telling Predicting future negative outcomes without evidence.

Magnification and Minimization (Catastrophizing)

Exaggerating the importance of negative events while downplaying positive ones.

Emotional Reasoning: Believing that your emotions reflect objective reality, such as "I feel bad, so everything must be bad."

Should Statements: Imposing rigid, unrealistic expectations on yourself or others, leading to guilt or frustration.

Labeling and Mislabeleding: Attaching negative labels to oneself or others based on past mistakes, rather than recognizing the complexity of human behavior.

Personalization and Blame: Taking responsibility for events outside your control or blaming yourself excessively for problems.

Identifying these cognitive distortions can help you to identify unhelpful thought patterns and work on challenging and modifying them with the guidance of a therapist.

Behavioral Activation Worksheet

Behavioral Activation is a therapeutic approach that encourages individuals to engage in activities that promote well-being and reduce depressive symptoms.

Use this worksheet daily to track your activities, mood, and progress. Over time, reviewing this information can help identify patterns, trigger positive changes, and increase awareness of the impact of your activities on your well-being. Progress may be gradual, and some days may be more challenging than others, but the consistent use of Behavioral Activation can lead to improved mood and functioning. Track these questions daily in a notebook or journal.

My Goals for Today

List one or two specific goals or activities you want to accomplish today to help improve your mood and well-being.

- Goal 1: _____

- Goal 2: _____

Morning Routine

Describe how you started your day, including any morning self-care activities, meals, or exercise.

Planned Activities

List the activities you plan to engage in today, including work or school tasks, social interactions, self-care, and hobbies.

- Activity 1: _____

- Activity 2: _____

- Activity 3: _____

- Activity 4: _____

Rate Your Mood

On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being extremely low and 10 being the best mood possible, rate your mood at different points throughout the day. Indicate the time of each rating.

- Morning Mood (e.g., 8:00 AM): ____

- Mid-Morning Mood (e.g., 11:00 AM): ____

- Afternoon Mood (e.g., 2:00 PM): ____

- Evening Mood (e.g., 7:00 PM): ____

Obstacles

Identify any obstacles or negative thoughts that may have interfered with your ability to engage in planned activities or reach your goals.

Positive Outcomes

Reflect on any positive outcomes or accomplishments you experienced today, no matter how small. These could be related to your goals or general feelings of satisfaction.

Evening Routine

Describe how you plan to wind down your day, including any relaxation techniques, bedtime routines, or self-care activities.

Self-Care and Well-Being

Note any self-care activities or acts of self-compassion you engaged in today.

Comments and Reflections

Use this space to jot down any additional comments, reflections, or insights from your day.

End of Day reflection

- On a scale from 1 to 10, rate your overall mood and well-being at the end of the day.

Journaling Page

A large, empty white rectangular area intended for journaling, centered on the page. The area is completely blank, providing space for the user to write or draw.

Habit Tracker

Month of _____



Habit

Tracker

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Note _____



Habit

Tracker

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Resources

Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) to be completed with a mental health provider:

http://www.namirockland.org/uploads/3/4/0/3/34038357/blank_wrap_forms_with_mc_permission.pdf

Online safety plan:

<https://www.mysafetyplan.org/>

Smartphone Apps:

Tappy, Daylio Moo Tracker, Headspace, Insight Timer, Molehill, Day One journaling app, Gratitude app