

Social Rhythm Therapy

Social rhythm therapy is a treatment that stabilizes mood by restoring the daily rhythms of the biological clock. We can actually all use a little help from social rhythm therapy. The average person’s biological clock runs a little behind, by about 15 minutes a day. However, people with mood disorders are hit especially hard by this disconnect because their clocks tend to lag even farther behind. This problem is more pronounced in bipolar disorder, but non-bipolar depression is close behind.

The way to fix a broken biological clock is to reset it throughout the day. The German’s have a word for events that set the biological clock – *zeitgebers* – which roughly translates to “time-givers.” Morning sunlight and evening darkness are the most important zeitgebers. Other strong zeitgebers include goal-directed activities, socializing, meals (especially dinner), and exercise. Use this worksheet to identify some routines to keep your clock running smoothly.

Goal-Directed Activity

Goal-directed activities – like work, school, and chores – alter brain chemistry, raising epinephrine and dopamine, and shifting the gears of the biological clock. It’s the time that you first take on these activities each day that matters. Aim to start them at a regular time, give or take 15 minutes. The exact activity may vary from day to day, as long as it’s active, goal-oriented, or productive in quality. Shopping, chores, work, reading, paying bills, running errands, doing crafts, planning trips, and taking online classes all count. What are some goal-directed routines you can use to wind up your biological clock each day?

Goal-directed activities	Start time

Social Interactions

Social interactions can also set the clock, particularly if they are active and engaging. Talking to your kids in the car or planning a project with colleagues count as active social interactions, but sitting with strangers at a bus station probably doesn’t. The reason: Active involvement with other people alters the neurohormones that set the biological clock. Can you recall the rush of attraction on a first date or the anger of a marital fight? Did you feel those interactions on a physical level, with a racing heart or nervous stomach? That was those neurohormones circulating in your body.

When social interactions get intense, it can feel uncomfortable, as if your nerves are overstimulated. Intense interactions can disrupt the clock, particularly if they happen in the evening and interfere with sleep. The following scale lets you rate the intensity of your social interactions from 0-3.

Rating		Effects	Examples
0	Alone	N/A	N/A
1	Neutral. Others are present but not involved.	Little emotional or physical effects	Making a deposit with a bank teller, waiting for a bus with strangers, saying hello to a neighbor
2	Moderate. Others are actively involved.	These interactions keep you engaged and involved, alert but not over-stimulated. It's easy to move on from these interactions without endlessly replaying them in your mind later.	Making plans with your family, discussing a project at work, light conversation with a friend
3	Intense. Others are very stimulating.	These interactions make you excited, anxious, angry, or over-stimulated. They may cause physical sensations, like racing heart, tremor, or muscle tension. The effects linger so that it's hard to sleep or turn your mind off after them.	Major events or celebrations, which may be positive (a first date, wedding, reunion, or job interview) or negative (a funeral, argument, or feeling bullied or embarrassed)

To set your biological clock, think of some moderate-intensity (“level 2”) interactions that you can build in at regular times in your day. As with goal-directed activities, these routines don’t have to involve the same people every day.

For example, on weekdays, a morning work meeting could fill this role, and, on weekends, walking the dog could fill the role. That’s right, pets count! When dog owners spend time with their canine, it activates the same areas of the brain that light up when they’re talking with their best friend.

Moderately engaging social interaction	Start time

Sleep, Meals, Exercise, and More

Goal-directed and social activities are not the only things that shift neurohormones. Just about anything that affects you physically can serve as a zeitgeber. For many people, the timing of meals and exercise has this effect. As you learned in Chapter 4, the time you get out of bed plays a big role too. Are there other routines that give a sense of structure to your day and help keep your energy and sleep on a stable course? List them here.

Putting it All Together

Once you've thought of some routines to start incorporating into your schedule, use the following "Social Rhythm Chart" to keep track of them and see how they affect your mood.

Social Rhythm Chart

Instructions

The following chart will help you keep track of the key routines that set your biological clock and balance your moods. In the first column, write down the routines you identified in the “Social Rhythm Therapy” worksheet. Remember, important routines to think about are goal-directed activities, social interactions, exercise, and meal times. The bookends of the day (morning and evening) are already included in the chart, as these are essential parts of your routine. Officially, the day starts when you get out of bed and stand up. Standing activates nerve cells that keep your blood pumping in the upright position, and those nerve cells help set the biological clock.

Notice that the chart doesn’t include the time you fall asleep. That one is harder to control than the time you get up, and worrying about it too much causes frustration and insomnia. Instead, create a wind-down routine and do it at regular times in the evening (see Chapter 6).

For each routine, identify an ideal time that you’d like to start it. Choose a time that’s likely to have a good effect on your mood and energy, as well as one that’s practical. You can adjust the “ideal time” as you try things out and figure out what works best. You can also use generic categories in the first column, like “goal-directed activity,” instead of identifying a specific activity. The specific activity may change from day to day but - ideally - the timing will not.

Each day, record the actual time that you started the routine. Aim for regular times (give or take 15 minutes). Next, rate how involved other people or animals were during the routine using the 0-3 scale previously described on page 137. Finally, at the bottom of the chart, rate your overall mood or energy level at the end of each day using the following -5 to +5 scale:

Mood/ Energy	Level	Distressing?	Causes problems?	Able to pull out of it?	Other people notice?
Depressed, unmotivated, or low energy	-5	Very	Major	No	Yes
	-4	Yes	Major	Sometimes	Yes
	-3	Yes	Minor	Sometimes	Yes
	-2	Somewhat	Minor	Yes	Sometimes
	-1	No	No	Yes	No
	0				
Hypo/manic, energized, or irritable	1	No	No	Yes	No
	2	Somewhat	Minor	Yes	Sometimes
	3	Yes	Minor	Sometimes	Yes
	4	Yes	Major	Sometimes	Yes
	5	Very	Major	No	Yes

With continued use, this chart will help you see how changes in your daily routine affect your mood. If your mood gets worse, look back over the previous one to two weeks to see if there was a change in the timing of your routines or the intensity of your social interactions. For example, a drop in meaningful social interactions can trigger depression, while a sudden increase can trigger hypo/mania or mixed states. If things are improving, look back to see which routines helped make that difference.

Social Rhythm Chart

Week of: _____	Sunday		Monday		Tuesday		Wednesday		Thursday		Friday		Saturday	
	Actual Time	people	Actual Time	people	Actual Time	people	Actual Time	people	Actual Time	people	Actual Time	people	Actual Time	people
Routine														
Get out of bed and stand up														
Evening wind-down														
Mood/energy -5 to +5														

Social Rhythm Disruptions: Planning Ahead

Holidays, Trips, and Major Events

Big events are stressful for everyone, even when they are positive. For people with bipolar disorder, they can trigger new episodes by disrupting daily routines. To reduce that risk, maintain regular timing with the routines you've identified on the "Social Rhythm Chart." Especially important are daily wake times, evening wind-down, and exposure to light and darkness at the bookends of the day.

Plan ahead with your travelling companions. What major activities do you anticipate? If there are exciting activities at night, can you opt out of them or take extra steps to protect your sleep? If any of your daily routines will get lost in the travel, can you substitute a similar one at the same time?

Jet Lag

Jet lag is a powerful disruptor of the biological clock. Flying across more than two time zones is one of the top risk factors for new episodes in bipolar disorder. Traveling by land and sea doesn't cause as much of a problem because they allow time for the biological clock to adjust.

You can minimize these problems by slowly adjusting your sleep/wake times, and your exposure to light and darkness, before boarding the plane. By shifting those times over a few days rather than a few hours, your body will think it's going on a road trip instead of an airplane.

Jet Lag Rooster is a free, online program that creates a preventative plan before and after you travel (www.jetlagrooster.com). Developed by sleep scientists, it asks for your flight information and tells you how to adjust your sleep and when to seek light or darkness. A dawn simulator (Chapter 4) or blue light blocking glasses (Chapter 6) can be used at those times.

You use this jet-lag plan to shift your daily routines. If the plan suggests moving your bedtime up an hour, move all your routines up an hour on that day. If it asks you to wake up an hour earlier, shift those routines back an hour.

Intense Activity

Intense activities can feel good or bad, and they can be exciting or overstimulating. Although these types of interactions can include other people (e.g., first date, job interview, celebrations, heated arguments), they can involve solo pursuits as well, such as taking on new projects, online shopping, playing video games, watching sports or political commentary, or anything that makes you want to keep going, often at the cost of sleep.

Hormones surge during intense activities, and that can disrupt mood if the events happen too suddenly, randomly, or too late in the day. You don't need to avoid intense activities; you just need to try to keep them from disturbing sleep and, if possible, move them to the morning.

Intense interactions with other people are harder to control, so you may need to enroll the help of those close to you in the effort. You can invite your close friends or relatives to read the worksheets in this section so they understand that there's a valid medical reason behind your request. In addition, you can use the following chart to help you enlist their support and develop a workable plan together. That will likely involve creativity and compromise.

Destabilizing Interaction	Effects	Management Plan
<i>Ex. Arguments in the evening</i>	<i>Can't sleep even if we resolve the argument, more reactive and irritable the next day.</i>	<i>We can set aside time before 3:00 p.m. for heated discussions. I'll promise to pick up where we left off. I won't use this plan to avoid addressing issues.</i>