

# How activity scheduling can improve your mood

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## Why planning helps

You will have no doubt experienced the unpredictable and changeable way in which MS symptoms present themselves. A good day can be followed by a few bad days, or a relapse can seem to arrive out of the blue.

It can be tempting to put aside plans when this happens, out of fear that you will not feel up to making a commitment. It may be that your mood is low or anxious, or that your fatigue or pain seems relentless and debilitating.

From a psychological perspective, abandoning plans actually tends to make things worse. Although doing so can leave you feeling temporarily relieved of pressure, in the long term it can leave you feeling that your MS is taking over your social, occupational, and family life, and that 'there is no point' in making plans or looking forward to things.

## Using planning constructively

**Daily plan:** Making a plan for each day is a great way to motivate yourself to get out of bed and not pull the duvet over your head! The evening before, write down a plan for the following day, scheduling *manageable* goals for morning and afternoon. Over a week, try to include a range of physical, social, cognitive, and meaningful activities. Planning 'me time' and bedtimes/rest times is also essential!

**Weekly plan:** As well as your day to day plans, also schedule a more major activity for each week. It may be easiest to reserve this for the weekend, when your family is together, or you may prefer to do something special when the others are at work and school. Think about something that you've been wanting to do for a long time, but have been putting off, then schedule it for this week.

**Monthly plan:** For each month, plan an activity that perhaps requires a day or two. It could be a weekend away, or a couple of separate activities (e.g. a day out with the family one weekend, a spa day on another weekend). The activities should be pleasurable and/or satisfying (hopefully both!). They can be social, or perhaps just time to yourself, such as spending a day with an old friend.

**Longer term plans:** Once you get accustomed to making plans and carrying them out on a weekly or monthly basis, you will probably feel more confident about making more major plans over the year. Planning a holiday, taking a course, starting a family tree, writing some poetry...whatever you choose should be something that gives you pleasure, and also presents a (manageable) challenge. You may be surprised at what you are capable of doing, as long as you are setting gradual, clear goals, and engaging in activities that are rewarding.

### **The impact of planning on our mood**

I suspect you might be thinking, ‘ Dr Hickox just doesn’t get it – I don’t feel up to doing any of this’. My reply is, don’t put the cart before the horse. Most of us, if we are feeling down or anxious, feel reluctant to make plans. But in fact, planning and carrying out activities is well known to boost our mood and our confidence. You don’t have to do it perfectly – give yourself a chance to get good at it.

It takes about 30 days for a new habit to become established, so persevere with your new schedule for a month, and then revise it if you wish. What did you learn from engaging in activities? See if planning has led to an improvement in your mood and your sense of achievement. If not, revise the plan – but don’t quit! Keeping your mind and body active, without overdoing it, is the key to helping you manage your MS symptoms.