Step-by-step task plan

Break the task into actions small enough to attempt. Choose one first step; the whole task need not happen today.

Editable PDF: replace or delete the fictional examples. Blank PDF: print and write. Guidance follows.

Task / purpose / what can be shared

Step	Small, concrete action
1	
2	
3	
4	

First step / when / where to stop

What I need / support / smaller step

What happened / next step

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Using this resource

Step-by-step task plan

What this helps with

A task can feel impossible when depression affects energy, concentration and confidence. Waiting until you feel fully motivated may leave it hanging over you, while forcing a large task can exhaust you. Graded task planning turns one goal into smaller actions and chooses a workable starting point. Completion is not the only information that matters: you can learn about barriers, useful cues and support. The plan should fit your health and circumstances rather than someone else's idea of an easy task.

How to use it

1. Name one task and why it matters now; consider whether it can be reduced, shared or deferred.
2. Break it into concrete actions that can each be started separately.
3. Choose a first step, a realistic time and a clear stopping point.
4. Prepare practical support, materials or an easier fallback step.
5. Review what happened, credit effort and adjust the next step using what you learnt.

A fictional worked example

For weeks, Rosa has avoided sorting letters because the whole pile feels overwhelming. Her goal is to identify anything that needs prompt action, not organise every document. She plans to sit at the table after lunch and open three envelopes, with a friend available for practical support. If that is too much, the fallback is to bring the unopened pile to the table. She opens two and identifies one bill that needs advice. The task is unfinished, but she has useful information and a next step: contact the relevant service with help. The review focuses on what made starting possible, rather than demanding completion that day.

Keep in mind

Some tasks need financial, legal, medical or practical help rather than more effort. Ask for suitable support. Do not use graded activity to push through significant physical symptoms, ignore rest needs or replace a healthcare plan. Escalating difficulties with basic self-care need clinical assessment.

Sources and attribution

Martell, C. R., Dimidjian, S., & Herman-Dunn, R. (2022). Behavioral activation for depression: A clinician's guide (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

NICE (2022). Depression in adults: treatment and management (NG222).

Original material informed by the sources above. No outside organisation endorses this worksheet.

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