

## Depression and Bipolar Recovery: Routine, Rhythm and Reflection

### Why work with Schedule?

Schedule is a means of working with space and time and you can't get more basic than that.

Almost any material about mood disorders recommends routine, e.g. getting up at the same time, regular meals, exercise. Most of the people I work with have tried scheduling; some have a collection of day timers and scheduling systems piled on their desks. They are skeptical about trying to "keep" themselves on a schedule.

One of the issues is the difference between linear time and vertical time. Linear time is just as it sounds: one thing after another, on the clock, moving forward. Vertical time on the other hand, is deep time: moments of meaning, timelessness when fully engaged, connection to a deeper sense of self.

As we know, the struggles associated with living with a mood disorder can leave you feeling that the world is moving too fast, that it is impossible to keep up. Meaning tends to drop away as we attempt to just keep going, to survive.

The purpose of scheduling in this case is to:

- \*create a workable container or **routine** that is based on gentleness. It is not about success or failure in filling in boxes of time and checking off activities.

- \*begin to establish **rhythms** in your day by weaving in incremental amounts of vertical time

- \*and to fend off harsh self judgements through **reflection**, ie, coming to stillness, taking the time to see where you are before moving forward.

Let's follow along with Frank as he puts Routine, Rhythm, and Reflection into practice as a part of his recovery.

### Routine: Creating a Container for Mood Changes

Frank groaned and rolled his eyes when I suggested that we work with his schedule. Schedule almost qualified as a dirty word in Frank's personal dictionary.

"I don't want to write down the stuff I am not doing. It's bad enough that I am not doing it. I don't want to hit myself over the head with my failures."

"Frank," I say, "we've got to start somewhere and we'll be in this together. We are not looking for success or failure but we are looking for **what works**. And specifically what works for *you*. You are being dragged around daily if not hourly by your mood changes

and reactions. Let's start building a **container** for all of that. Let's start working with ways to soothe your brain and to help you to stabilize."

"It kind of scares me," Frank says. "If we schedule every minute of every day I think I'll just shut down."

"Good point Frank, so would I! So let's start with some basic pieces and adjust and correct our headings each week. In fact, you have already started. You're sleeping better, getting up earlier instead of at noon. That's the most basic and perhaps the most important routine - night and day. Sleep and wake."

"Yeah, I don't feel like I am falling apart all of the time now - just some of the time. Big progress," Frank says, almost rolling his eyes again.

"It is progress. You don't have to believe me right now, but good sleep is the foundation for everything else in your life. Let's look at your morning routine. How do you start your day?"

## **What is Routine?**

Routine is the skeleton of schedule. The bones. The days and the hours have an identity beyond our current mood or thoughts. Bedtime. Mealtime. There's a children's song about the days of the week. Monday we wash our clothes Tuesday we iron the clothes, Wednesday we sweep the floor and so on. There is a structure that holds us. For many of us that structure may be built around a job or children. Show up at 8 am for work. Pick the kids up from school. Routine is the repetition of daily or weekly activities as a discipline that we come back to again and again.

## **Why is Routine an Important part of Recovery from Mood disorders?**

When there is a disturbance in mood and thoughts, it is incredibly easy to get lost and walk in circles. For example, people with depressive symptoms often tell me they lose track of time and can't get themselves out of the house. Their experience of their day can feel very ill defined and blurry. Some of the folks with bipolar disorder describe to me losing all perspective when something interesting or potent crosses their path. A sense of priorities is dropped like pick up sticks scattering.

Routine becomes what we come back to - our landing pad if you will. Have you ever been in the midst of a really strong emotional reaction but had an activity scheduled. Like meeting a friend or an exercise class. What you might have stewed about for hours, suddenly dissipates or at least softens as you engage in activity. We shift our attention. We move on. Our energy shifts.

Let me be clear. I am not saying that mood disorders can be fixed by a shift of activity. However we can begin to train our brains to come back to routine and give ourselves some relief in the process.

### **What might some of the aspects of routine look like?**

Frank is starting to take interest in this idea of schedule. As we discuss his life he recognizes that he frequently feels lost in his day. He recognizes that he spends a great deal of time trying to decide what to do and fretting about whatever he is not doing.

“So what might I look at first?” Frank asks.

“Here are some ideas to start with,” I say.

- Working toward getting up the same time each day.
- Working toward getting out of the house in the morning as a way of creating contrast and an official start to your day
- Having and scheduling meals
- Allowing time for travel and transition in your schedule.
- Morning and evening routines.

“I’ll give it a try,” says Frank, “let’s meet next week to see how it goes.”

### **Rhythm: Weaving together Meaning and Every Day Life**

Frank came into his next session both excited and frustrated.

“I am actually doing pretty well with the basics at this point. My sleep has improved a lot since I first started meeting with you. My wife is great about taking care of meals so I have a lot of support. But this feels so kindergarten to me. Just keeping up with the basics isn’t enough,” Frank said.

Routine is the foundation. Let’s spend some time today talking about **rhythm**. **Rhythm** can feel like graceful movement through the course of a day. You’re not expecting too much or too little of yourself. There tends to be a variety of activity: taking care of the ordinary details like washing the dishes, having some sense of connection with others, activity that is infused with personal meaning, time to relax, time to play. Let’s look at this together.

### **What makes a really good day?**

“Frank, try to remember a day that at its end you fell into bed with a sense of deep satisfaction,” I suggest.

“Hmm. Well, I can remember a day last summer. I got up early on a Saturday because I agreed to take a bike ride with my friend. The air was cool. I enjoyed my friend’s company and felt happy that I had made the effort to get up.

“Then when I got home I remember plopping on the couch with my kids and some of their friends who had spent the night. We watched Bugs Bunny. Then I worked with my wife in the garden for a couple of hours. We had a chance to chat and also had long stretches of silence. It felt really good to be working together. We took time to admire the garden and anticipate our luscious crops.

“I fell asleep in the hammock listening to the Rockies game in the late afternoon. And we made burgers with the kids in the evening.

“You know it’s funny, I would not have thought of that day if you hadn’t asked. It was no big deal but I do remember feeling really satisfied.”

“Great example, Frank.” I continued, “Most of us know very well what a good day feels like. We don’t always take the time to notice what the key ingredients are. On any given day we can look back and know if it was satisfying or if something was missing. We may wish that we had exercised or taken time to be with another.”

### **Columns A, B, and C**

So imagine 3 columns:

Column A = immediate. It is all that stuff that we do to keep our lives going. Mowing the lawn, paying the bills, emptying the dishwasher, going to work. In depression lingo, it is also associated with survival mode.

| <b>A. Immediate</b> |  |  |
|---------------------|--|--|
| clean clothes       |  |  |

Column C = dreams and meaning. It might be that you someday want to write that great novel you’ve been thinking about, or sail the world, or start a foundation for kids in need, or join the Peace Corps or take a training to become a yoga teacher or go back to school. It’s the list that expresses who we are and what we feel we have to offer the world.

| A. Immediate |  | C. Dreams and Meaning |
|--------------|--|-----------------------|
|              |  | write that novel      |

Column B = Weaving together A and C. Bringing greater meaning into everyday life.

| A. Immediate | B. Weaving of A and C | C. Dreams and Meaning |
|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
|              | schedule writing time |                       |

To use the above examples, it means that I would perhaps schedule writing time or make a point of taking a sailing class or have a regular yoga practice. With great intention I am aware of what is meaningful for me and I take time to make it an important part of my schedule. Folks working with mood disorders can often find their Column B blank. They are putting the bulk of their energy into meeting daily demands. They may know what their dreams are, but under the blanket of depression, the dreams may feel unreachable.

“Wow,” Frank commented, “now I know why Bugs Bunny felt so good. I often feel guilty that I don’t spend enough quality time with my kids. That day without much effort, I felt like a good dad.”

“Good point. Our meaningful activity doesn’t have to be monumental. It simply has to have that lift of satisfaction: I am doing what I want to be doing. Remember when we talked about Unifying Principles? Unifying Principles help us to remember and incorporate what is important.”

Frank wondered aloud, “ So why do you feel this is especially important for people like me with mood disorders?”

“Because the pattern can be painfully exaggerated with mood disorders. If someone is living in Column A in survival mode and Column C seems like shattered, impossible dreams then Column B, the weaving, can be almost non-existent. Like you said in the beginning, just getting by with the basics isn’t very satisfying. We all need a sense of meaning and satisfaction.”

“When I am depressed and not functioning very well, I don’t have much energy. I feel guilty if I spend the little energy that I have on things that mean something to me like going sailing. But if I do, I feel so much better, at least for a little while. I think I am beginning to understand why I can give myself permission. How the weaving of good stuff helps to create that rhythm you were talking about.”

“You don’t need to ask me twice,” said Frank. “I’ll work on a recipe for a good day and column b and see you here next week.”

## Reflection: Coming to Stillness

“So Frank, how was your week?”

“I don’t know. The day or two after our meeting I thought a lot about what makes a good day and what is important to me but I don’t feel like I got much done. I don’t even remember what I did exactly.”

“That’s fine. Let’s take a look at your schedule from the week. It’s a perfect opportunity to work with **reflection**. That’s when we pause before moving forward to see where we’ve been.

“In this high speed, high activity world of ours it is easy to feel like we are being swept away or flooded. After a week of activity it is helpful to take the time to **come to stillness** to appreciate our journey and to correct our course as needed. Interestingly enough it is a time of self acceptance.”

## Week in Review

The first step in **reflection** is to peruse your schedule. Allow your mind to recall how time was spent, the weather, people you spent time with. Allow the items on your schedule to blossom, expand. Allow the details of your days to reemerge. It can be helpful to jot notes.

Now circle the times that were satisfying. Circled items could be something like this:

- great hike on Sunday
- got that report done at work on time
- my child’s softball game was a blast to watch
- lots of thunderstorms - really enjoyed them
- delicious strawberries for breakfast
- I’m loving my yoga class, the teacher is awesome

Now look at what didn’t work as well as it could have. What felt out of synch.

- felt embarrassed when I was late for the team meeting at work
- had 2 glasses of wine after yoga class, didn’t feel good, couldn’t sleep
- felt out of it at work the next day which was the day of the team meeting!

- don't feel like I connected with Jen this week - "us" time needed?
- feels like the summer is moving too fast- camping trip? longing for something
- wish I had more time to hike

At this point you may have a visceral sense of what your week has been like. It is likely that you will have ideas about what you want to include in the week to come.

It might look something like this given the above examples:

- I want to schedule hiking, yoga and at least one softball game
- I do not want to drink wine after yoga class!
- Talk to Jen to see how we can spend time - workout? movie? dinner in the mountains?
- maybe when we spend time we can talk about doing something special as a family
- pressure is on at work with a project deadline so I want to pay attention and eat and sleep really well.

**What's right and good?**

**What are the relationships between things?**

**What am I moving toward?**

Frank looked thoughtful and alive.

"This is interesting. I came here feeling tired and vaguely dissatisfied. Like I had somehow failed. Now I feel more relaxed, in focus. I have a clearer picture of my life and its ok."

"Great. I also do this practice every week. What I often notice is that places that I have judged myself harshly soften as events melt back into context and flow. It tends to leave me feeling challenged and excited about the week ahead."

"Exactly," said Frank. "Can we summarize what we just did so I can remember it when I am doing it on my own?"

"Okay. Here's the short version:

**Reflection, coming to stillness:** taking the time to contemplate the week

**What's right, what's been satisfying, what has worked:** circle satisfying items

**What are the relationships between activities:** notice patterns

**What do I want to move toward:** what do I want to try next week

How is that, Frank?"

“Routine, rhythm and reflection makes a great package. I feel like I have a lot that I can keep working with over the weeks to come. Can I invite Jen to join is in a few weeks so that we can look at this as a couple and a family?”

## **Summary**

Frank continued to work with his schedule. He was now keeping a schedule in order to take care of himself and to have a satisfying life. He also uses his schedule as a way of recognizing when he is going off track, mood-wise or life-wise. He readily has a way to reflect on his life and fine tune.

Frank’s story is a composite and he moves through the steps week by week. It’s important to remember that your process will look like your process, depending on the severity of your symptoms, the kinds of support available, whether you are working, parenting and so on. For some people, getting sleep regulated takes some time. For other folks leaning into Column C activity enlivens them.

You will hear this message repeatedly: for any Recovery Principle that is offered, make it your own. Find your way and your pace. Find what works for you.

I hope Frank’s story gives you some ideas about dynamic ways to work with your schedule. Now, where is that day timer of yours?