



Making meaningful connections

Improving social networks through taking action

Flinders University Institute for Mental Health & Wellbeing



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University

Institute for Mental Health &

wellbeing

Tackling social isolation and loneliness

In **Part 1 – Learn** of this chapter, you'll learn about what science says about dealing with social isolation and loneliness.

In **Part 2 – Do**, you'll try out different actions to help you break out of the vicious cycle and start to improve your connections with others.

Then, **we will ask for your advice** on how to share this information with other people who have an eating disorder.

All the stories in this chapter are based on the experiences of real people who have struggled with eating disorders.



Help us help others!

People tell us the ideas in this chapter are interesting and helpful. But we need your help to learn how to best support people with eating disorders. By sharing your experiences and advice, the more we can help others.



We know that **you are the expert** in your life and have more insight into what it's like to be a person with an eating disorder.

Please complete this chapter thoughtfully and share your feedback at the end to help us learn the best way to present this information to others like you.

Tell us what worked well for you and what didn't, so we can improve and make a real difference **together**.

Part 1 – Learn!

Have you ever tried assembling a jigsaw made of hundreds of pieces?

You can start to see the picture before all the pieces are assembled, but it takes multiple pieces to be in place before the picture starts to come together.



Tackling social isolation and loneliness is a bit like this—one strategy won't be enough to change the isolation in your life—but putting in place **many** strategies (i.e., pieces of the puzzle) will start to make your life feel less lonely.

If you are feeling lonely ... you are not alone!

Surveys tell us that around **10% of children and young people** often experience loneliness. There is even a website on this topic: <https://endingloneliness.com.au/>.



Loneliness isn't just about not being around people—it's more about wanting deeper or better connections with the people in your life. You might have people in your life but still feel lonely if you don't feel as close to them as you'd like.

An eating disorder can be a very isolating experience—it can cause you to push some people away, make others step back, and prevent you from socialising because you're avoiding situations that involve food and eating.

This is how an eating disorder works.

Take Phoebe's story for an example...

Phoebe's story:



I didn't tell anyone about my eating disorder for the longest time. I was so ashamed and honestly thought people would look at me differently.

My shame and self-doubt just kept building, and I ended up isolating myself, thinking it would make things easier. But really, it just made everything worse. It felt like being stuck in a tiny room where all I could hear were my negative thoughts, getting louder and louder.

Isolation and eating disorders kind of go hand in hand, like they're always there together.

Feeling alone in the world is hard enough, but pulling away from others just makes that shame and self-loathing so much stronger. It's like this cycle that pulls you deeper into the eating disorder, trying to cope with feelings that feel too big to deal with.

Phoebe's story is very common.

The eating disorder triggers a **“must avoid”** response: avoid being close to others in case of negative judgement, avoid situations that involve food, avoid situations in case they reveal how flawed we are. For Phoebe, this meant she wanted to hide, saw people less, had more time to ruminate (have repetitive negative thoughts), and felt worse about herself, and sadder.



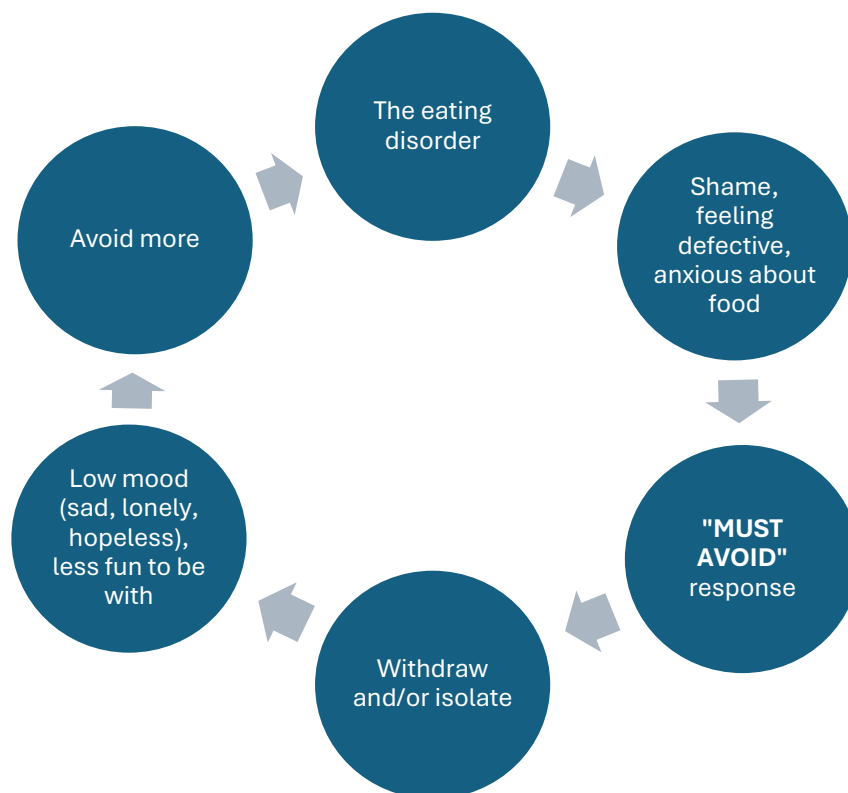
In fact, the human brain is programmed and designed to respond to stress by avoiding danger!



For early humans this part of our brain helped us to keep safe, and to avoid some very bad things like getting eaten by a sabre-toothed tiger. And sometimes, it still protects us from danger.

But other times, our brain gets things wrong. It can stay in **“must avoid”** where danger does not even exist.

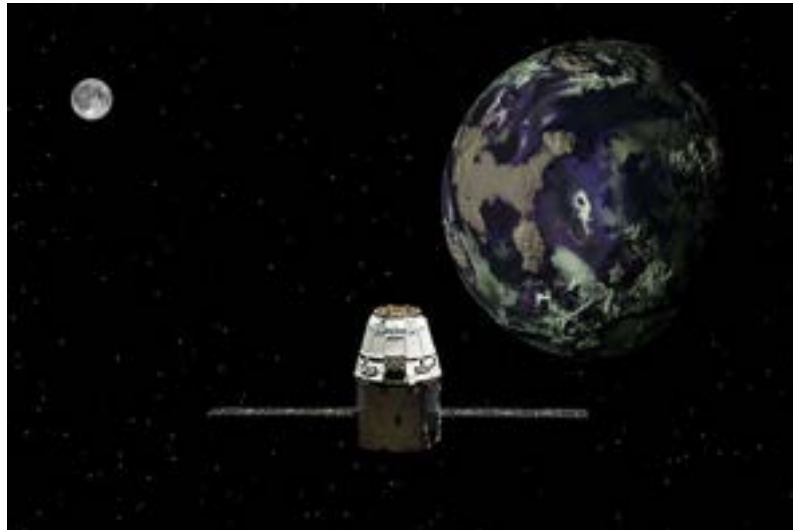
When our brain makes a mistake and tells us to avoid situations where danger doesn’t exist, we can get into the vicious cycle that Phoebe describes.



The more time you spend in the vicious cycle, the more entrenched it becomes, the harder it feels to break out of it.

BUT good news – by taking action, you can break out of the cycle.

Breaking out of a vicious cycle is like changing the direction of a satellite's orbit around the earth. Satellites weigh a ton! But because they are in a non-gravity situation, one small push with a finger can make it change course.



Research shows that **at least 15¹** types of action can help you break out of the vicious cycle. We are going to look at **5 of these** to get you started:

1. Mapping social opportunities	Map the people in your network, what you want to change, and how you want to expand it.
2. Goal setting	Setting personal goals, considering obstacles, and deciding how to move forward.
3. Behavioural experiments	Identify and test out your negative predictions (hypotheses).
4. Activity scheduling	Schedule and participate in mood-elevating activities that involve others.
5. Identifying personal strengths	Your traits that have helped you successfully manage demands in the past and how they can be used now.

¹ You can access the research paper here: <https://doi.org/10.1037/ccp0000454>; You may also want to listen to the following podcast: <https://podcasts.musixmatch.com/podcast/the-imperfects-01h1ngdz40px2mkqvxexy3x5f/episode/dr-emily-friendship-4-eva-01h8w99wg07fxrtkeb6c09v9mr>

Make sure to fuel your brain



Research highlight

Research shows that even small amounts of dieting can affect how your brain works—and for young people, whose brains are still developing, the effects can be even stronger.

When your brain doesn't get enough food—especially carbohydrates—it can shrink and stop working properly. This makes it harder to think clearly, manage emotions, and solve problems. It also lowers serotonin, a brain chemical that helps with mood, which can lead to feeling more depressed. The good news is, proper nutrition can help restore it.

To start feeling better, your brain needs the right fuel. That's why eating enough is such a big part of recovering from an eating disorder. A nourished brain is stronger and more able to learn new habits and ways of thinking.

Here is what “eating enough carbohydrates” looks like. It is recommended that approximately 50% or more of total energy of your diet should come from carbohydrate.

Select at least 4 servings over the day – examples of servings are below.²

<input type="checkbox"/> ½ cup muesli	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ Corn Flakes	<input type="checkbox"/> ¾ cup cooked cous cous
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Sustain	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 roll	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked barley
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup All Bran	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 pita bread	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup sweet corn
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Sultana Bran	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 slices bread	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked quinoa
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Just Right	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 fruit toast	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup mashed potato
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked porridge	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 tortillas	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 medium baked potatoes
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ cups Special K	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked pasta	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 large sweet potato
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ cups Rice Bubbles	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked rice	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 cups cooked noodles

² This information is available from the Real Food Guide - <https://cbt-t.sites.sheffield.ac.uk/resources>

What would you suggest Phoebe do to break out of her vicious cycle?

You can pick one or more of these strategies:

- ☐ Social mapping opportunities
- ☐ Goal setting
- ☐ Behavioural experiments
- ☐ Activity scheduling
- ☐ Identifying personal strengths



What is one thing Phoebe could do to follow your suggestion? Tell us in 2-3 sentences below. If you're not sure, it is OK to guess.

Thanks for giving Phoebe advice! Here is what she ended up doing:

The first step was the hardest. I decided to get treatment so I could talk to someone about what was happening. Talking about it and improving my nutritional intake made it easier to talk to some other people in my life, people I could trust and who I thought would not make a big deal of it. This immediately made me feel less lonely.

One of these friends suggested that I join her Amnesty International group, so we could work with others on a common and shared value of supporting human rights. Talking to others in this structured context helped me feel like I was doing something important without feeling awkward.

I reconnected with a friend who started coming around more so we could watch movies together. Then I got involved in some volunteer work where I made some new friends. I started to see I had things unrelated to my eating and appearance to offer to other people.



So, by doing something differently, Phoebe started to break out of the vicious cycle. As she started eating enough carbs and using new behaviours, her brain built new pathways that made those behaviours feel easier over time and helped improve her mood. This is something anyone can do, including you ... simply by taking action.



BONUS: The better you get at taking action, the more you can support others in coping with challenges too, and the more people will want to be with you and the more engaged you will feel with others.

Let's choose ways you can start taking positive action in your own life.

Part 2 – Do!

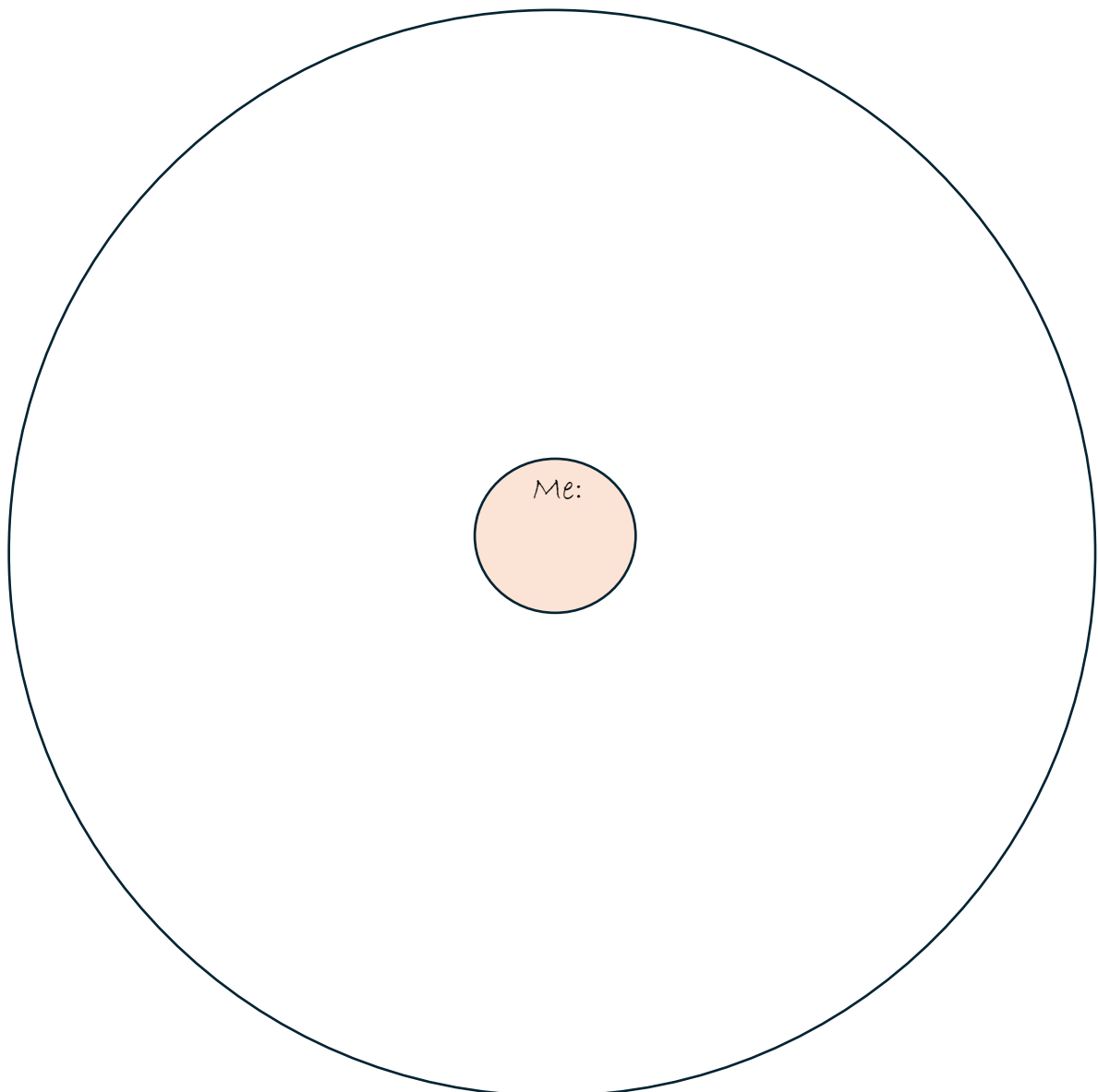
1. Map your social opportunities

Complete the social mapping activity on the next page to help you map out who's in your life right now, what you'd like to change, and how you might grow your support network.

You'll need two different colour pens for this activity.

Start by writing your name in the centre of the diagram.

1. **Current map:** Write the names of people in your life **right now**—family, friends, anyone important (they can be alive or dead, near or far). Place them closer or further from you on the diagram based on how close you feel to them. For example, you might put a close friend or loved one near you, and someone like your psychologist a bit further away.
2. **Ideal map:** Using a different coloured pen, go back to the names you wrote in step 1 (your current relationships) and draw arrows to show how you'd like them to change. You can also add new names and place them in your ideal position—people you may have been close to before the eating disorder, or people you have met more recently that you would like in the circle.
 - a. Arrow pointing toward you = you want to feel closer to them.
 - b. Arrow pointing away from you = you want more distance from them.
 - c. Dot = you want the relationship to stay the same.



Now take a few minutes to reflect on what you learnt from completing this activity?
What new information emerged?

What have you learnt from this activity?	
Were there any surprises?	
How have your relationships changed since the eating disorder started?	

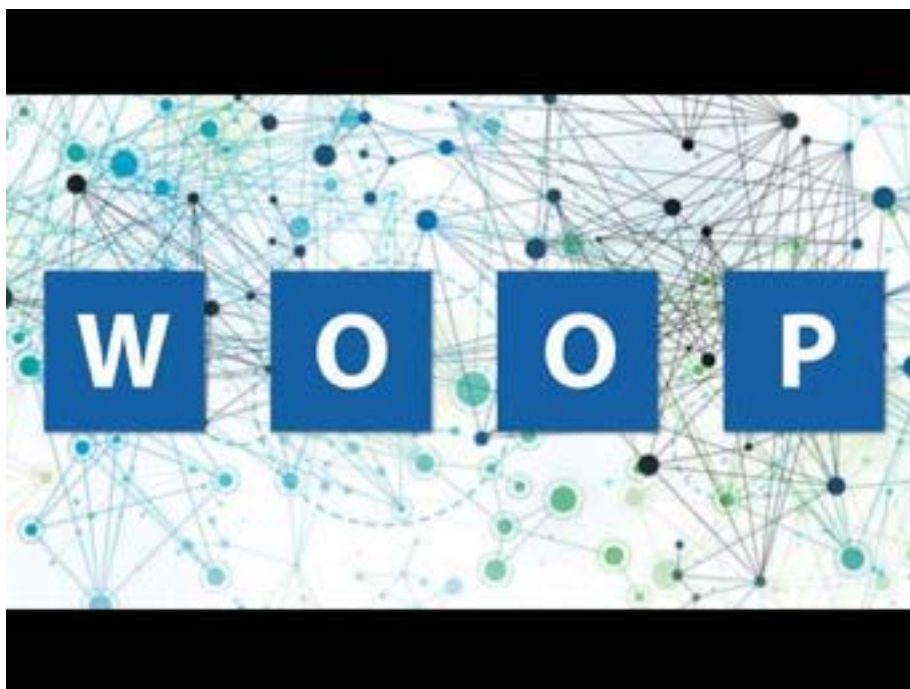
2. Use your ideal map to set some goals

Based on your ideal map (step 2 from the activity above), set some goals based on how you want your relationships to look and how you would like them to change.



Let's do a Wish Outcome Obstacle Plan (WOOP) for how you might start to improve your current relationships.

Watch the video below³:



³ <https://www.youtube.com/embed/yBaVSJ6zq4c?feature=oembed>

Create your WOOP for one of your relationship goals above.

The goal I chose is: _____

My WOOP:

<p>What is your <u>wish</u> for the next 4 weeks that seems challenging but achievable? <i>As you name your wish in 3-6 words, imagine writing it in glowing letters on a sign at the end of your path. Keep it in the front of your mind as you move forward in this exercise.</i></p>	<p>Wish:</p>
<p>What is the best <u>outcome</u> that you can imagine, the best outcome about fulfilling your wish? <i>Picture the scene in vivid detail—where are you, what are you doing, and how do you feel?</i></p>	<p>Outcome:</p>
<p>What is the one main <u>obstacle</u> in you that stands in the way of realising this wish. <i>Picture a wall or barrier that appears on the path towards your wish, a habit, a fear, or a thought that makes it harder to move forward.</i></p>	<p>Obstacle:</p>
<p>What is your <u>plan</u> to overcome your obstacle? <i>Imagine you have a tool in your hand that represents your power to overcome the wall. It could be a key, a ladder, or a burst of energy to break through. What action or thought is your tool? Picture yourself using it and watching the wall disappear. Write your action or thought in one sentence.</i></p>	<p>Plan (action/thought):</p>
<p>If/then plan: If [write obstacle here]: _____ Then [write action/thought here]: _____ _____ <p style="text-align: center;">Great work. Now slowly repeat this plan.</p> </p>	

Congratulations! You have completed a WOOP that will help you to start to improve your current relationships and help you feel more connected with others.

Look out for obstacles or roadblocks!

Dealing with obstacles is part of life but it can be tricky.

Sometimes when you try to make a positive change or break out of a vicious cycle, **“roadblock thoughts”** can get in the way. These are the negative or unhelpful things we tell ourselves that can stop us from moving forward. Everyone experiences them now and then.



Three **roadblocks** are especially common, these are:

1. I'm never in the mood to do things with people, so I just can't take positive action.
2. I wanted to take positive action today, but I just couldn't do it. This is impossible.
3. Taking action is too hard. I just can't do this alone.

Because everyone has roadblock thoughts sometimes, it's helpful to have a plan for how to handle them. So, let's come up with a plan for how you can deal with them when they show up.



Let's look at each roadblock in turn.

1. I'm never in the mood to do things with people, so I just can't take positive action.

This is a very common thought. Sometimes it just takes time for your brain to “catch up” to the helpful actions you decide to do. In the meantime, here are some things you can try: break your activity into smaller pieces, plan your activities for times when you are sure you can really do them, tell someone you trust about your activity so they can support you, set an activity reminder on your phone, remind yourself that the activity will help your mood even when you don't feel like doing it.

2. I wanted to take positive action today, but I just couldn't do it. This is impossible.

That thought is perfectly normal – you will have easier days and harder days. Every day is a new chance to succeed. If you are really worn out, try something for 5 minutes to show yourself you are worthwhile. If you have more energy, try a hobby you like or a 10-minute walk. Every positive action is a step toward feeling better, no matter how small.

3. Taking action is too hard. I just can't do this alone.

Almost everybody needs help to take positive action. In fact, science shows us that just be asking for help can put us in a better mood. For some people, the best support comes from friends. For others it is family. If you are nervous about asking for support, you can do it in small ways first – you could ask a friend to check in with you to see if you have done your positive action for the day. You can even make a game of how many days in a row you can do it. *These are just examples – you are the expert on what getting support should look like for you.*

In the future, which roadblock do you think might get in your way most?

1. ☐ I'm never in the mood to do things with people.
2. ☐ I wanted to do my important activity today, but I just couldn't do it.
3. ☐ I don't know if I can do this alone.

**Let's make a plan for dealing with these roadblocks
if they come up for you.**

Roadblock thought	My action plan
1. I'm never in the mood to do things with people	<input type="checkbox"/> I can ask this person for help or support
	Person:
	<input type="checkbox"/> I can be a good friend to myself saying ...
2. I wanted to take positive action today, but I just couldn't do it	<input type="checkbox"/> I can ask this person for help or support
	Person:
	<input type="checkbox"/> I can be a good friend to myself saying ...
3. I don't know if I can do this alone	<input type="checkbox"/> I can ask this person for help or support
	Person:
	<input type="checkbox"/> I can be a good friend to myself saying ...
	<input type="checkbox"/> One small thing I can do to take positive action is ...

3. Set up a behavioural experiment

Try being your own scientist and set up a behavioural experiment to test the **predictions or “what ifs”** you have about going after your goal.

These experiments work best if you try them a few times over therapy.

Think back to the relationship goals you set earlier. What are your worries about trying to reach them? These are your negative predictions.

Now, set up an experiment you can try to test if those predictions are really true.

My behavioural experiment:

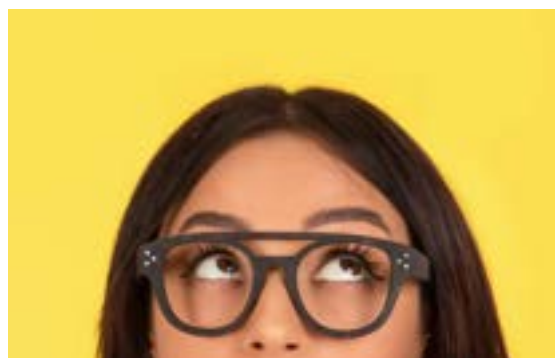
Step 1: What is your prediction? e.g., if I tell Max about my eating disorder, he will stop talking to me.	
Step 2: How much do you believe this prediction (hypothesis) from 0 (not at all) to 100 (absolutely, no doubt at all)?	
Step 3: What is the best possible outcome? e.g., when I tell Max about the eating disorder, he will be understanding and want to know more and find out how he can help.	
Step 4: How much do you believe this prediction (hypothesis) from 0 (not at all) to 100 (absolutely, no doubt at all)?	
Step 5: How can you test which prediction is most true over the next week? e.g., what day/s and times over the next week will you do it, what will you say, is someone else with you?	

Over the next week, complete your behavioural experiment (step 5).

Once you have completed your behavioural experiment, complete step 6 and 7 below to review how it went and what information you learned from it.

Step 6: What happened?	
Step 7: Which prediction (hypothesis) is most true? How strongly would you now rate your belief in it <i>now</i> from 0 (not at all) to 100 (absolutely, no doubt at all)?	

Congratulations! You have completed a behavioural experiment. Continue being a scientist in your own life by setting up more behavioural experiments to test the predictions or “what ifs” you have about your relationship goals.



Becoming a
Scientist in Your
Own Life

4. Activity scheduling

Find a way to help you connect with people who make you feel good by planning different activities that you can share with others.

Using the list below, pick one or more activities you could share with others in the next week.

<input type="checkbox"/> Baking or cooking a meal to share	<input type="checkbox"/> Listening to music
<input type="checkbox"/> Going out for a meal or a snack with a friend	<input type="checkbox"/> Playing online games
<input type="checkbox"/> Going for a walk	<input type="checkbox"/> Playing a sport
<input type="checkbox"/> Sitting and chatting	<input type="checkbox"/> FaceTiming
<input type="checkbox"/> Talking on the phone	<input type="checkbox"/> Other ideas
<input type="checkbox"/> Watching a movie	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Watching a funny YouTube, TikTok video or Instagram reel	_____

5. Identify personal strengths

Think about your **personal strengths**—the qualities or skills you have that can help you build stronger, more satisfying connections with others.



Sometimes important parts of us are **hidden from other people**, even our nearest and dearest. These can be personal strengths (e.g., thoughts, feelings, personality traits, things we did or were involved in) that we don't notice, or they may be aspects that we would really like others to know or notice but are not sure how to communicate them.

The task below helps you look at these hidden parts.

Set aside some time (max 20 mins) to write about “the personal strengths I ignore, or others don’t see, hear or notice about me”.

Write this as a letter to a friend, real or imaginary.



Dear...

Now consider with your therapist—how can you put these personal strengths to use in making more satisfying social connections?

How can you keep tracking your strengths, so you don’t ignore them or minimise them in the future?

Thanks for putting together your own action plan. By doing so, you have already taken steps toward positive action.

Now we need your help...

Now that you've heard the science and heard from other people, we'd like you to share your own story and advice. We would like to use your story and advice to help other people like you to deal with some of the challenges they may be experiencing.



Imagine someone your age (Joy) who experiences the same roadblock that you selected above – the one you made a plan to deal with.

Based on what you have learned today about the brain and taking positive action, what would you tell Joy to let them know that they can stand up to their roadblock thought and start to break out of the vicious cycle?

How would you help Joy cope in a more helpful way?



Thank you for helping us today!

**And well done – you’ve completed the Making
Meaningful Connections chapter!**

*Keep Up the
Good Work!*

Remember...

stay close to people who:

♥ inspire you,

♥ believe in you,

♥ support you,

♥ and celebrate with you.