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Practicing Internal Strengthening: Engaging in Healthy Activities (Session 8 of the Treatment Manual)

To keep the body in good health is a duty, otherwise we shall not be able to keep our mind strong and clear. —Siddhārtha Gautama Buddha (Founder of Buddhism)

Session 8 focuses on the practice of internal strengthening, which is defined as a person's overall physical, mental, emotional, and inner health. The goals of internal strengthening are to develop a sense of balance, a feeling of centeredness, and a state of inner peace. Internal strengthening can be equated to what Traditional Chinese Medicine would call strengthening one's inner Qi or energy (pronounced *nèiqì*—內氣). Associating inner strengthening to traditional Asian concepts of energy balance and imbalance is an important cultural adaptation. It helps promote the idea of holistic well-being and inner peace, which helps bridge client beliefs and increases client buy-in to treatment. Core to inner strengthening is the ability to let things go and not to internalize stress into one's own body or externalize harmful emotions (eg, anger and frustration) toward other people. The focus on inner strengthening helps clients understand the importance of the mind–body relationship, and highlights the benefits of engaging in healthy activities. Similar to other sessions, therapists start off by reviewing the session goals, which include:

- Complete weekly check-in and review of take-home exercises;
- Understand that engaging in healthy activities can improve your mood;
- Understand different types of healthy activities;
- Understand what healthy activities you enjoy;
- Understand barriers to engaging in healthy activities;
- Address the barriers that might affect you;
- Plan the daily healthy activities you will engage in this week.

These session goals fall within the following chapter goals:

- Continue to consolidate gains through the use of weekly take-home exercises and practice
 - Complete weekly check-in and review of take-home exercises
- Understanding the concept of internal strengthening
 - Understand that engaging in healthy activities can improve your mood
- Strengthening ourselves through healthy activities
 - Understand different types of healthy activities
 - Understand what healthy activities you enjoy
- Overcoming obstacles and barriers by aligning with cultural values
 - Understand barriers to engaging in healthy activities
 - Address the barriers that might affect you
- Plan the daily healthy activities you will engage in this week.

CHAPTER GOAL #1: CONTINUE TO CONSOLIDATE GAINS THROUGH THE USE OF WEEKLY TAKE-HOME EXERCISES AND PRACTICE

After reviewing the session goals, the therapist conducts the client's weekly check-in and review of take-home exercises. This is important because it maintains the tempo and expectations for the program and helps reinforce the significance of continued practice.

Weekly Check-In and Review of Take-Home Exercises

In reviewing the take-home exercises, the therapist inquires about the client's week and troubleshoots any difficulties in completing the "climbing the mountain" technique. In doing so, the therapist highlights important issues that will help consolidate the client's mental strengthening skills. Because, cognitive reframing may be a relatively new concept to many Asian heritage populations, it is important to emphasize that practice will help reinforce their skills and to emotionally support clients in reducing their worry thoughts. The therapist provides psychoeducation that the goal is not to get rid of all worries and anxiety, rather, to reduce the length of time they worry and the intensity of how deeply they fall into downward spirals.

Reiterating the metaphor that psychotherapy and take-home exercises are like physical therapy and exercises can help normalize practice and provide motivational hope that perseverance can improve mental and emotional strength. Therapists can ask the client what was helpful and what wasn't helpful to help troubleshoot and resolve difficulties in completing take-home exercises.

CHAPTER GOAL #2: UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF INTERNAL STRENGTHENING

Internal strengthening is an integral part of traditional Asian culture, religion, philosophical, and spiritual beliefs. The importance of internal strengthening is commonly seen in various aspects of Asian heritage cultures ranging from meditation, martial arts, yoga, education, medicine, stories, role models, tea ceremony, and even in cartoons. For example, the ultimate achievement in martial arts is not physical strength, skills, or techniques, but rather the ability to be calm and face adversity with clearness of thought and effective action. Martial artists, spiritual leaders, and religious monks often undertake meditational retreats to cultivate inner strength. In addition, many Asian cartoons and anime also focus on the cultivation of inner strength, which helps people ascend to the next level physically, cognitively, and emotionally. This can be seen in many animations, where the ability to focus one's internal energy leads not only to inner peace and wisdom, but also the ability to focus one's Qi or energy and physically shoot a fireball or energy blast. Internal strength is cultivated by meditation and mindfulness, an integral part of many Asian philosophies, exercises, and healing systems. However, meditation is not the only way to achieve internal strength. The culturally adapted treatment manual emphasizes that internal strengthening can also be improved through cognitive reframing and behavioral activation. Specifically, they are all mutually reinforcing.

When somebody is internally strong, they feel balanced, centered, and at peace. They are less likely to be emotionally triggered by stressful life situations, and are also less likely to be affected by interpersonal drama and conflict. People who are internally strong are better able to respond to situations and less likely to react emotionally in an unproductive manner. They are also better able to engage in wise action and are mentally strong and able to think optimistically about the future. Helping clients understand that they can become stronger internally with practice and commitment to change is an important focus of the manual. The emphasis on internal strengthening is an important aspect of culturally adapted therapy for Asian heritage populations.

The inclusion of internal strengthening as a topic domain is an important part of culturally adapting treatments for Asian heritage populations. This is why the treatment manual modifies traditional cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), which places a primary initial focus on changing cognitions. Instead, this culturally adapted approach changes both the ordering and domains that are emphasized during treatment. Specifically, the manual targets three primary areas to help improve a person's mood, including behavioral strengthening (problem-solving, managing social problems, and engaging in wise or effective actions), cognitive strengthening (thinking in healthier and more effective ways), and internal strengthening (improving one's energy, feelings of centeredness and balance, and engaging in healthier self-care activities).

The internal strengthening approach can help clients reduce psychiatric distress, while increasing feelings of centeredness and balance. For example, in Chinese culture, there is a saying that emphasizes preserving inner peace, calm, and emptiness (pronounced *zhì xū jìng shǒu* in Mandarin Chinese—致虛守靜). Moreover, inner strength and peace help clients reduce their worry thoughts. For example, changing 1 million thoughts (pronounced *wànniàn* in Mandarin Chinese—萬念), to one thought (pronounced *yī niàn* in Mandarin Chinese—一念), to no thoughts (pronounced *wú niàn* in Mandarin Chinese—無念), is a central goal in developing inner peace. This saying can be culturally adapted and bridged with CBT, which also has a focus on reducing worry thoughts and letting go. It is important to note that the meditational focus of being “thought-less” or absent of thought is not a central focus of traditional psychotherapies. This is an important recognition of traditional Asian healing systems, which are making important contributions to the treatment of mental illness through the mindfulness and meditation movement. This approach asks clients to heal their minds and reduce how full it is (ie, “thought-full”) and to clear their minds so that they can think more wisely (ie, “thoughtful”). This is another example of how studying culture can help highlight and improve the treatment of mental illness. It does so by highlighting culture-specific and culture-universal factors that may be therapeutic and beneficial for those within and across groups. Integrating extant cultural strengths is an important part of tailoring therapy for Asian heritage populations, and part of Domain 6 of the Psychotherapy Adaptation Modification Framework (PAMF).

Understand That Engaging in Healthy Activities Can Improve Your Mood

Session 8 emphasizes that engaging in healthy activities can strengthen a person internally, which has a beneficial effect on one’s mood. In doing so, the manual underscores that participating in healthy activities is a necessity, and not a luxury or waste of time. Because of lack of familiarity with mental health services, some people from Asian heritage backgrounds may feel stigmatized seeking help, distrusting and questioning its efficacy. As a result, they may be less willing to commit financial resources and/or invest time in the treatment process. Helping educate clients that psychotherapy can be extremely beneficial, and may help prevent their problems from getting worse is an important psychoeducational intervention.

The manual emphasizes that engaging in healthy activities can help combat depression, help them feel better, and increase their energy so that they are better able to problem-solve and cope with life stresses—thus helping them reach their goals. This requires both enhancing the frequency of healthy activities that they currently participate in or have practiced in the past, as well as encouraging the client to learn new activities and engage in new behavioral coping strategies. The therapist points out that engaging in healthy activities helps strengthen them internally and has important benefits. They can be enjoyable, fun, and help them reach their goals of achieving inner peace and greater balance.

However, engaging in healthy activities when there has been an absence thereof requires an adjustment period and can be quite painful at times. For example, the therapist could say something to the effect of “Because you haven’t exercised in a long time, it is natural that exercising will be difficult and you may even get physically sore. Nevertheless, through perseverance and hard work, it will get easier over time and you will start experiencing the health benefits. This is not just something that I am saying. There is a lot of empirical research to support that exercise can help with stress management and improve a person’s physical and mental health.” Therapists can focus on the emotional, physical, and internal strengthening benefits of exercise and other healthy activities. The manual emphasizes that engaging in healthy activities can help clients:

- Feel more relaxed;
- Reduce the effects of stress on your mind and body;
- Help you feel more centered;
- Give you more energy;
- Help you focus;
- Help you sleep better;
- Increase your patience;
- Help you better manage your emotions;
- Decrease physical aches and pains;
- Help increase the flow of healthy “Qi” or energy;
- Reduce the stagnation of Qi or energy in your mind and body.

Because Asian heritage populations often place a high value on education and empirical science, referencing research findings can be a very effective cultural adaptation that can be easily emphasized in psychotherapy. This helps highlight therapeutic benefits, makes them more concrete, and facilitates acceptance and motivation to take action. Moreover, it is important to understand and emphasize the disadvantages of not engaging in healthy activities. This is related to the Asian heritage concept of cause-and-effect (pronounced *yīnguǒ* in Mandarin Chinese—因果), which can be bridged to the treatment and help clients understand the consequences of not engaging in healthy activities. These include increased anxiety, depression, stress responses, poor sleep, aches and pains, physical health problems, and reduced inner strength. Cause-and-effect can be further highlighted with an illustration. For example, if you take a healthy person and they continually do not exercise, the likelihood that they will become depressed and unhealthy is very high. Therefore, engaging in healthy activities is a necessity for a healthy mind and inner strength.

Given the collectivistic and interpersonal nature of Asian heritage populations, normalization through personal or clinical examples from other patients can be beneficial. It is important to emphasize that exercise has been extremely beneficial to the clients that you have worked with, and that many clients have received direct benefits and were able to break out of depressive episodes because they started and continued with a regular exercise program. Personal examples and professional reflections by the therapist help clients identify with the benefits and capitalize on socially important case illustrations. They also help to ultimately reassure the client and increase motivation, engagement, and compliance. Although some traditional therapies may restrict therapists from giving personal examples, given the collectivistic nature of Asian heritage populations and the tendency not to divulge personal issues to strangers, therapists being more flexible and selective in personal disclosure may be a beneficial cultural adaptation.

CHAPTER GOAL #3: STRENGTHENING OURSELVES THROUGH HEALTHY ACTIVITIES

Session 8 of the treatment manual identifies four main types of healthy activities. In doing so, the manual helps clients decide which activities may be most beneficial, troubleshoot barriers to engaging in healthy activities, and helps them become more organized. Concretely establishing goals, expectations, and a realistic schedule are highlighted.

Understand Different Types of Healthy Activities

This section focuses on helping clients understand different types of healthy activities. In nonculturally adapted treatments, the most prominent behavioral activation exercises are focused on exercise and physical activities. It is important for clients to understand that there are many types of healthy activities, not all of which are limited to exercise. This section provides a concrete plan for engaging in different types of healthy activities and ensuring completion through solution-focused and problem-solving strategies. The four main types of healthy activities include physical, social, task-oriented, and relaxation. The manual discusses that some of these activities belong to single categories, but that some of the activities overlap and belong to multiple categories. Many different examples within each category are provided.

Physical: Going to the gym, jogging, lifting weights, walking, yoga, martial arts, Tai Chi, dancing, hiking, cycling, playing a sport, swimming, walking the dog, ping pong, badminton, and golf.

Social: Spending time with friends and family, playing mahjong, playing cards, playing board games, eating, drinking tea or coffee, walking with friends, karaoke, talking on the phone, going to the beach, watching a movie with friends, going to church, going to a community event, joining a club, volunteering, visiting your relatives, watching soap operas, raising a pet, and babysitting.

Task-oriented: Cooking, cleaning, gardening, washing dishes, doing laundry, shopping for groceries, decorating, running errands, home improvement, reading, going to the library, taking a class, paying the bills, shopping smart and finding bargains, knitting, and taking care of others.

Relaxing: Read a book, take a hot shower or bath, getting a massage, listening to music, meditating, fishing, bird watching, cloud watching, sitting in the sun, watching the sunset or sunrise, listening to running water (rivers, ocean, waterfalls, or fountains), mindfulness, deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, playing a musical instrument, breathing fresh air, going to the beach, and reflecting on good memories.

The presentation of healthy activities in four domains is a cultural adaptation. Specifically, many traditional therapies present activities in one continuous list; whereas, the manual separates them out into categories that are particularly meaningful for Asian heritage populations. For example, social activities are particularly meaningful for those from collectivistic backgrounds, and relaxation activities help foster inner strength and are an important part of mindfulness and meditation—which stems from many Asian traditions. In addition, the manual was developed for community mental health care and other low-resource/low-income populations, and therefore includes many activities that are not limited to having financial resources, transportation, or a large social network. Activities are separated out into four domains to be conceptually understandable for those who have limited understanding and exposure to mental health services. They also include simplistic tasks which can be more readily accomplished by those who are more severely depressed and who are lacking in energy and motivation.

For example, the task-oriented healthy activity category was created specifically to help those who are depressed feel a sense of accomplishment when they are able to manage functional tasks (eg, paying the bills, running errands, doing the laundry, and cooking and cleaning). Many of our clients had difficulty getting out of bed and doing even the most basic self-care activities before they began the treatment program (eg, brushing their teeth or going grocery shopping). Because nearly all of our clients were low income, we also focused on culturally adapting therapy and generating lists of activities that were free or low-cost. This is very important because many clients will say that they can't think of anything they enjoy, except for things that cost money. They become frustrated and give up because they are not living the life situation that they had imagined. Many of our clients often rationalize that if only they had money they would not be depressed and things would be okay. Helping clients realize that depression afflicts both the wealthy and poor is an important psychoeducational focus. After processing their feelings, wishes, and fantasies for their circumstances to be different, they are more open to refocusing their treatment goals and engaging in healthy activities. The culturally adapted manual emphasizes the importance of effectively coping with life stressors, no matter the circumstances one is in. This helps empower the client to make changes.

In addition, the manual also culturally adapts therapy by including common Asian cultural activities across each of the four categories. For example, the physical activity category includes popular Asian sports such as yoga, martial arts, Tai Chi, dancing, hiking, ping pong, and badminton. Common Asian social activities include playing mahjong, drinking tea, karaoke, and watching Asian soap operas. A number of activities in the relaxation category are deeply intertwined with Asian concepts of energy and internal strengthening, such as meditation, mindfulness, acupuncture, massage, hot springs, and being one with nature. These are culture-specific activities that are important in the cultural adaptation process, and part of Domain 6 of the PAMF. The manual emphasizes that having a good balance and engaging in activities in all four categories helps promote internal strengthening. This in turn promotes client health and confidence as they face various life circumstances. In addition, it helps reduce depression, increase happiness, and improves motivation. The manual emphasizes that behavioral activation and engagement in healthy activities are necessary to depression intervention, as well as prevention of future recurrent episodes. The importance of integrating healthy activities into one's lifestyle is underscored.

The manual also takes an active learning approach to engaging clients. Specifically, clients are asked to circle the activities that might be most enjoyable for them. Having the clients manually circle each possibility utilizes a multisensory approach to client engagement and memory consolidation. Clients visually see the various activities, generate their options, voice their commitments, and discuss the activities chosen through the dialectic with the therapist. Clients are also asked if there are activities that they enjoy that are not included in the list. It is a good idea to not only provide a list of options, but also important to individualize the treatment and brainstorm other possibilities. This psychoeducational and individualized approach aligns well with the cultural values of Asian heritage populations.

Understand What Healthy Activities You Enjoy

In the “what activities do you enjoy” in-session discussion, therapists work with the client to develop a list of activities that may be beneficial for them to engage in. They are asked to identify four activities in each of the four major categories. Clients are queried whether these are activities they currently do, used to do, or something new that they need to learn how to do. This psychoeducational and individually tailored approach helps capitalize on activities they know and already enjoy, as well as promote the development of new coping strategies. Because Asian heritage populations may be less familiar with therapy, utilizing this semistructured approach

may help them feel more comfortable and less frustrated if they struggle with coming up with ideas on their own. This helps them feel less hopeless, as they realize that they do have options. Moreover, because of the authoritarian nature and social hierarchy evident in many Asian heritage cultures, some clients may also feel more comfortable with choosing items from a list before generating activities on their own. The treatment manual also utilizes an active learning approach by asking clients to write down their chosen activities in the spaces provided. This process is repeated when generating ideas for activities in each of the four categories. This iterative approach also helps reduce confusion and ambiguity because the same structure and format is repeated, thus reducing the need to learn too many tasks.

CHAPTER GOAL #4: OVERCOMING OBSTACLES AND BARRIERS BY ALIGNING WITH CULTURAL VALUES

When working with clinical populations, it is very important to try to predict obstacles and preempt barriers from impeding the follow-through of healthy activity plans. One of the chapter goals is to help clinicians understand how to overcome obstacles and barriers by aligning with the clients' cultural value systems. Specifically, the manual focuses on the goal-oriented nature of Asian heritage populations, as well as the emphasis on education. Utilizing a problem-predicting and solution-focused approach can be extremely beneficial, and aligns well with the problem-solving nature of Asian heritage populations. Addressing barriers to task completion is essential to client engagement and reinforces positive outcomes.

Understand Barriers to Engaging in Healthy Activities

In this section, therapist and clients understand that it is sometimes difficult to follow through with the healthy activities that we plan. Therapists provide psychoeducation on some of the most common barriers that our clinical populations face, which include: poor excuses (eg, thinking that it takes too much time, that you will not enjoy yourself, or using not having enough money as an excuse), unhealthy activities (eg, drinking alcohol, smoking, using drugs, gambling, and staying in bed all day long), and setting unrealistic goals (eg, leading to failure, disappointment, reinforcement of negative thinking, and engagement in unhealthy activities). By discussing these issues in advance, therapists can help increase follow-through (which helps reinforce self-efficacy), reduce what can be perceived as an inability to accomplish one's goals (which can help decrease feelings of failure), and normalize the process (which can help clients understand that many people have difficulty breaking the negative cycles of depression, a direct symptom of which is lack of motivation and loss of energy to complete tasks). Providing psychoeducation about these issues can have a significant impact on treatment progress.

Address the Barriers That Might Affect You

When developing an individualized plan for clients, therapists lead the clients through an in-session discussion that focuses on addressing the barriers that might affect their adherence to their healthy activity plan. The therapist notes that it is sometimes difficult to stay on a healthy activities schedule and follow through with our plans. They ask the client to identify barriers that might keep them from engaging in healthy activities and how they might be able to overcome these obstacles. In addition, they are asked to discuss why some of the previous barriers mentioned above (ie, poor excuses, unhealthy activities, and setting unrealistic goals) are not good reasons for giving up and not engaging in healthy activities. Specifically, depression is characterized by lack of motivation and energy, and we sometimes make choices or even excuses to ourselves that reinforce the depressogenic cycle. It is important not to be pulled into these clinically maladaptive patterns. Therapists can also provide hope to the client and highlight that these barriers can be overcome with appropriate planning and use of problem-solving skills.

Developing an effective plan to overcome barriers to healthy activities is the main focus of this in-session discussion. An effective plan includes problem-solving barriers, developing realistic goals and expectations, practicing and taking things one step at a time, and evaluating and reevaluating your goals and strategies, and dedication and commitment. It is important to underscore that change is not easy, but with hard work and perseverance, incremental and sustainable progress can be made. This is congruent with the practice and strengthening focus of the treatment manual, which previously related psychotherapy to physical therapy and exercise.

An example is given about running long distances, and that people may not be able to do so immediately. However, by starting off with smaller goals (eg, starting with getting out of bed, and then slowly increasing our goals to walking around the block, jogging 1 mile, jogging 2 miles, and then increasing the distance), anybody can be successful at accomplishing their objectives. Developing realistic goals and expectations is important to client sense of confidence and self-mastery. An unrealistic plan increases the likelihood of activity noncompletion, which in turn reduces self-esteem and increases feelings of failure—thus reinforcing depression’s downward spiral.

CHAPTER GOAL #5: PLAN THE DAILY HEALTHY ACTIVITIES YOU WILL ENGAGE IN THIS WEEK

This in-session discussion provides a concrete worksheet where clients can schedule their healthy activities during specific days and times. Active worksheets such as this one provide structure that helps clients stay on task and reduce procrastination. Therapists discuss with the client how just like in everything in life, we need to practice and develop our skills in order to reach our goals. Clients are asked to schedule at least one healthy activity per day. Although this may seem like a lot for some clients, others can accomplish much more (eg, sometimes scheduling three activities a day can be more beneficial, especially since many can be completed relatively quickly and conveniently). This decision depends on their personal situations (eg, if they are not working, then scheduling multiple activities can be extremely beneficial).

Clients are asked to schedule a wide range of activities from each of the four major categories so they can understand the benefits and experience them multiple ways. They are also asked to evaluate whether they can realistically accomplish their goals because we want to develop plans that can be effectively accomplished and are less likely to lead to failure. Specifying a particular day of the week and time helps facilitate success. In addition, clients can also use the alarm clock “cueing technique” from the previous session as an auditory reminder to help ensure they will stay on task. This is a very effective strategy for those who have a tendency to forget, or for those who are extremely depressed and who have low motivation and energy. Clients are also asked to identify barriers that might reduce the likelihood of accomplishing their task, and to troubleshoot how they might overcome those barriers or revise the plan.

Finally, clients are also asked to rate their anticipated enjoyment from engaging in a specific activity, and also asked to rate how enjoyable the activity actually was after they complete it. This is called the “pleasure principle” and is a longstanding therapeutic intervention that has been found to be highly effective. Most clients will rate the task more enjoyable after they complete it than they had initially anticipated. This is because a major symptom of depression is anhedonia, or loss of feeling pleasure. When clients engage in evidence-based exercises such as this, they are more likely to experience the direct benefits. This increases their confidence in the treatment and improves the likelihood of continuing to complete planned tasks. Ratings are scored on a scale ranging from 1 to 9.

Clients are asked to incorporate healthy activities into their life over the next several weeks of the program. Expectations are reinforced and they are told the therapist will ask them about their activities the following week. Because the treatment program was designated to be 12 weeks long for clinical trial purposes, this worksheet is not repeated during the remaining sessions. However, therapists should encourage clients who are capable of practicing this exercise while learning new ones to continue doing so for the remainder of the program. Those who are utilizing the treatment manual in their own clinical practice may want to spend several sessions on engaging clients in healthy activities and help them consolidate their healthy activity plan. This is especially important because many clients will need multiple sessions in order to truly master these skillsets and break out of their depressogenic cycles. Developing a healthy lifestyle can be very beneficial for internal strengthening.