Depression, Motivation, and Recovering Agency · About 4 minutes

A Small Step You Can Stand Behind

Why the meaning of an action matters as much as its size

“Just sort a few photographs.” It sounds gentle. For Dina, opening the box would mean being with something she used to love and has struggled to return to.

Making a task smaller sometimes helps. But size is only one part of whether an action is possible or useful. A small step may still be unwanted, inaccessible, or disconnected from what matters to the person being encouraged.

Dina, in this fictional example, used to enjoy making albums. Someone suggests that she spend a few minutes sorting photographs. She could perhaps manage it, but she feels no wish to begin. What she misses is talking with her sister, who lives elsewhere. The photo box answers another person's idea of a worthwhile afternoon.

Keep the purpose open to question

The suggestion isn't necessarily foolish. Old interests can be worth revisiting, and enthusiasm does not always arrive before action. A difficult appointment may be important even when you would rather avoid it. The question is whether Dina can recognize a reason for the step that she herself stands behind.

If she wants contact with her sister, asking whether a short call is possible may fit better. Her sister might be unavailable. Dina might find conversation tiring. The call could matter without improving her mood. Those possibilities belong in planning, rather than being treated as disappointing deviations from a promised success.

Bandura's account of agency includes intention, reflection, and participation within social conditions.[1] Here, that invites us to notice who is choosing the step and what support exists. Choice alone cannot supply energy or access.

A useful revision to the familiar advice might be: “What would make this small effort worth doing for you?” You can consider that question with Dina's example. There is no need to choose an action for yourself.

Depression can impair starting, deciding, and sustaining everyday activities.[2] If a person wants to act and cannot, further persuasion may add to their distress. Treatment, help with basic needs, or reducing another demand may be more fitting. Persistent or worsening difficulties deserve professional assessment; an exercise cannot replace it.

The situation may also involve an essential responsibility. If Dina has promised something she cannot complete, another person may still be depending on it. Care could mean communicating the problem or arranging help, rather than insisting she accomplish it alone. Accountability becomes more useful when it includes actual capacity.

If Dina eventually speaks with her sister, she can notice how the conversation was. It may bring comfort, sadness, fatigue, or a mixture. The result helps her consider what she wants next. It does not have to prove that the approach worked or explain the whole depression.

© 2026 Brian Kennedy. All rights reserved.

A small action can also remain small. A welcome phone call needn't become a schedule of calls. Enjoying a few minutes of an old interest needn't turn it into a project. Protecting the scale at which participation was wanted may make it easier to choose again.

Dina's life deserves care while she is uncertain about the next step. Before making the task smaller yet again, it may be worth asking whether it is the right task.

Dina’s box of photographs shows why a task can be small on paper and ask a great deal of the person trying to begin it.

The photographs can stay in the box for today. If Dina wants to open it another day, she can decide whether she wants someone beside her or simply wants to look at one picture.

Companion reading · When Life Becomes Hard to Reach

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Depression, Motivation, and Recovering Agency (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. Annual Review of Psychology, 52, 1–26. Source.

[2] National Institute of Mental Health. (n.d.). Depression. Source.

© 2026 Brian Kennedy. All rights reserved.