

# OPA

Organize. Prioritize. Act. A manual for teaching Stress Management to people living with mental illness by assisting individuals in taking charge of overwhelming stressors, creating daily structure, and setting goals.

Bio: Martin K. Abdo

Martin is a Certified Peer Specialist at Seattle's Harborview Medical Center who has lived and successfully managed symptoms of mental illness for the past twenty years. He was diagnosed with Bipolar in 1994. Martin originally created the OPA tool outside of work for himself in November of 2009. He used this tool as a way to avoid triggering his bipolar symptoms while undergoing tremendous stress and overwhelming feelings in both his private life and work environment. He was simultaneously beginning the process of separation and divorce; parenting his three-year-old son, and taking on increasing job responsibilities at Harborview. Having successfully managed his symptoms with medications and counseling for 16 years, he wanted to continue this trend. Martin's goal was to be able to live independently, work, take care of his well-being, and co-parent. In the last four years, by using OPA daily for his personal life and work, Martin has successfully managed to get through a divorce, rent his own apartment, co-parent his son 50% of the time, take on more work responsibilities, and engage in a new healthy relationship with his partner Kelli. Martin's tool has been successfully implemented at a large mental health outpatient clinic in Seattle for three years. He provides individual counseling with the tool in-person and over the phone and facilitates a weekly OPA group. In addition, Martin piloted the OPA tool with case managers, employment specialists, and housing staff at the outpatient psychiatry clinic. The OPA tool is currently being piloted on two inpatient psychiatric units in a major hospital in King County. SAMHSA recently requested to have OPA shared on their listserv. Martin presented at the Washington Behavioral Healthcare Conference in 2012 and 2013 and the King County Behavioral Healthcare Conference in 2011 and 2013. Martin did consulting and was paid by the King County Mental Health, Chemical Abuse and Dependency Services Division, Department for Community Services, of King County, Washington. He trained NAVOS Peer Bridger's on using OPA for goal setting. Martin hopes to empower individuals by having them successfully use OPA to prioritize and take action on their needs, manage overwhelming stressors, create daily structure, and achieve goals.

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## **Definition and Purpose of OPA:**

### **Definition:**

O: Organize random supportive thoughts/ideas by listing from top to bottom on paper

P: Prioritize the random supportive thoughts/ideas by using numbers

A: Act. Follow the numbers in numerical order. Use as an "Action List"

### **Purpose:**

OPA is a cognitive behavioral tool used to reduce stress quickly and effectively by switching a person from an emotional state to a logical state of thinking. The tool can be used to manage overwhelming stressors, create daily structure (when he/she has too much or too little daily structure), or achieve goals.

OPA is simple in format. Its one-page worksheet only requires four steps. OPA is an effective cognitive tool, because it produces quick results for stress reduction. With some brief training, the tool can be taught and passed onto others as another way to manage stress. In addition, the tool is cost effective; only pen and paper are required to assist the person in need. The tool can be taught in a group setting, individual counseling, and even over the phone. OPA is for anyone who feels overwhelmed at times, struggles with short term memory, tends to avoid or procrastinate, or is disorganized in their thought process with random and racing thoughts.

The intention of OPA is to quickly define the stressor and guide and support the person in need while drawing upon their own wisdom, experience, and strengths, rather than prescribing a set course of action.

Since 2009, Martin has used the OPA tool on a daily basis to address all of the above. The tool creates order in a person's world and puts the individual back in control of their life. The person is self-validated and empowered by OPA by giving them a voice and formulating a path for them to take action and move forward with their recovery process. It brings about transformation in the form of newfound confidence, increased self-esteem, and independence.

OPA offers several benefits for those who live with mental illness. There are times in a person's life when he or she is bombarded with one or more overwhelming stressors all at once. OPA is excellent at aiding the individual in naming the stressor, quickly organizing random thoughts, prioritizing by number, and taking action accordingly. Many people lack daily structure due to their struggles with short-term memory, which increases stress and symptoms; OPA offers support with this challenge. OPA takes the overwhelming feeling out of reaching short and long-term goals by simplifying the steps in order to achieve them.

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## **Details and Uses of OPA:**

### **Identifying and Titling the Stressor:**

Whether managing an overwhelming stressor (de-escalating), creating daily structure, or achieving goals, one first needs to be granted the space to freely express their stress and receive validation by the provider. By doing so, the individual will be more successful at identifying and titling their own stressor, owning, and taking action on the stressor. Titling allows him or her to begin the process of switching from an emotional state to a logical state of thinking. Martin has found this first step to be the most important and impactful in reducing stress with OPA. If the individual is struggling with generating a concise title, the provider can lead the person by using open-ended questions. The key is to have people who are under stress use their own words when filling out the OPA worksheet. By doing so, each individual takes his or her first step towards ownership, empowerment, and action towards their own recovery process.

**Organize:** Organizing random supportive thoughts/ideas for reducing stress.

First, allow the person you are assisting to list their supportive thoughts/ideas from top to bottom on the OPA worksheet by using the blank lines that are provided. By letting them go first, you again add to their empowerment. This brainstorming process reduces stress by allowing the person to see there is more than one option or solution to a problem. Concise titling of the stressor and brainstorming allows the individual to think more clearly and rationally. Therefore one can draw from one's own experiences and come up with multiple ideas for reducing the stressor. The number of ideas written down for reducing stress does not matter. When assisting a person in need always ask for permission before suggesting or recommending ideas for reducing their stress. Most individuals appreciate suggestions if they feel stuck. They will likely let you know if they like the suggestions or will be willing to follow through with the suggestions, since they are not being told what to do. From years of teaching the OPA group and offering one on one support with the OPA tool, Martin has found that people are more likely to take action when they draw from their own ideas and resources. To get people started with brainstorming ask open-ended questions. Some examples: "What has helped you manage your voices in the past?" "The last time you lost housing, what steps did you take?" "The last time you were employed, what steps did you take to get a job?"

**Prioritize:** This next essential step tends to be the second most challenging piece of OPA in reducing stress. Prioritize the importance of the random supportive thoughts/ideas by using ranking numbers. The most important thought or task for reducing stress or offering support is assigned number one. The second most important thought or task is assigned number two, etc....**Key:** Have him or her take their time and be honest with themselves when numbering the random thoughts. More than often an individual will need some guidance and support around prioritization. All of us have a tendency to avoid what can be most difficult or uncomfortable in reducing stress. The person offering support has an objective point of view on the stressor and can gently challenge him or her on their numbered hierarchal path to success at reducing stress. When a person keeps random thoughts and ideas in their mind, they are more likely not to prioritize and see all of their options. If the stressor is challenging or has multiple steps, a person will tend to avoid it all together. That is why it is essential to transfer a person's stressor from their mind to paper so that the stressor can become more concrete and manageable for the individual. By titling, organizing the random thoughts, and then thoughtfully prioritizing with numbers what thought would most likely reduce the stress the fastest, one's stress reduces even more. Numbers work because they create a hierarchy of importance, unlike using color-coding or the alphabet to create a pathway to success.

**Action:** The last, and often the easiest step, is Action. "Action Steps" break the stressor down into individual and achievable steps. Once the person has thoughtfully and honestly numbered the random supportive thoughts/ideas, it then becomes easy to avoid avoidance and take action. Now, no thinking is required to take action in reducing one's stress. The process of taking action becomes automatic by just following the numbers in numerical order. Don't read the list like a "To Do" list. You have now created an "Action List" by using numbers to signify importance. Follow one number at a time, starting with number one. Cross out each number when each action step is completed for daily structure and/or achieving goals. Don't cross out numbers if using as ongoing support for managing overwhelming stressors.

### **Using Decimals:**

Decimals make the action list flexible if priorities change or a mistake is made while prioritizing the “Action List”. Rewriting the list is then not necessary, since one reads the “Action List” by following the numbers in numerical order.

### **Using Symbol before Listed Thoughts**

Using either a circle or “less than” symbol before each thought is very useful for managing daily structure and achieving goals. Sometimes due to time constraints or circumstance, one is unable to achieve the steps in order as planned. By circling the symbol, one is then reminded that they must come back to that greater priority, before moving onto the next numbered priority. OPA is designed to get the most important things done in order to reduce stress quickly. OPA is not about getting everything done. It is not a “To Do” list.

### **Using Dates to Achieve Goals:**

Using dates for achieving goals holds one more accountable for getting things done. Assign dates in the left hand column of the OPA sheet, next to the numbers. The dates need to be realistic and can be changed if necessary.

### **Keeping Separate Notebooks for OPA:**

Put OPA worksheets in a three ring binder or create one notebook for each stressor: overwhelming stressors, daily structure, and goal setting. Refer to when needed and follow numbers in numerical order in order to reduce stress or achieve goals.

### **In summary, the purpose of OPA:**

- 1) Decrease stress quickly and effectively by switching the overwhelmed individual from an emotional state to a logical state of thinking, so they can take steps toward their recovery goals
- 2) Manage overwhelming stressors/de-escalate
- 3) Create daily structure
- 4) Achieve goals
- 5) Empower the individual-by drawing upon their own experiences and internal resources, and guiding them through prioritization
- 6) Create “Action” lists. OPA is not a “To Do” list, as the focus is not about getting everything done
- 7) Encourage honest reflection with self; what really needs to get done first
- 8) Provide a cost effective, flexible tool requiring only minimal training that can be used in groups, individually, or over the phone.

**Examples of OPA Stressors:**

- Overwhelming Stressor
- Daily Structure
- Short Term and Long Term Goals

**OPA: Overwhelming Stressor: Just Lost Housing**

1. Stay with a friend or family member
5. Stay at a shelter
6. Stay at a respite
7. Sleep in tent city
3. Talk to peers who have also been homeless
4. Call Crisis Line-if needing additional support
2. Talk to Case Manager-resources/support

**OPA: Daily Structure: Monday/OPA/5/28/13**

1. Breakfast
6. Lunch
8. Dinner/TV/read/etc.
3. Shower
2. AM medication
4. See CM at 9am
5. Dr. appointment at 10am
9. Bed at 10pm
7. Go to movie at 2pm

**OPA: Short Term Goal: Find Part Time Work to Pay Monthly Bills**

- 7/3 4. Check Craig's List/Job Board daily
- 7/1 2. Update resume
- 7/14 7. Fill out applications online
- 7/10 5. Find something; write cover letter
- 7/12 6. Have Employ. Specialist proof cover letter
- 7/2 3. Have Employ. Specialist proof resume
- 7/20 8. Practice interview questions with friend
- 6/20 1. Inform CM/Employ. Specialists need work

**OPA: Long Term Goal: Higher Education**

- 10/1 5. Research schools
8. Once accepted, apply for Financial Aid
- 7/2 2. Explore programs: content and logistics
- 10/1 4. Decide on degree
- 8/1 3. Do informal interviews with those in field
- 12/1 6. Decide if cost effective-new career
- 12/1 7. Apply for schools
- 7/1 1. Speak with DVR-how much pay?

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**Practice:**

**Overwhelming Stressor**

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**Practice:**  
**Daily Structure**

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**Practice:**

**Short-term goal**

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**Practice:**

**Long-term goal**

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