Automatic Thought Identification

A collaborative prompt sheet for beginning CBT therapists

01 The purpose: notice the thought, not prove it wrong

Automatic thoughts are quick interpretations or predictions that arise in a situation.

They may be words, images or memories. First identify the thought in the client's own words.

A thought is different from a feeling, an event or a fact.

02 The five-stage discovery pathway

1 ANCHOR	Choose one recent, specific moment.
2 EMOTION	Name the feeling and rate its intensity (0-100).
3 THOUGHT	Ask what went through the mind at that moment.
4 MEANING	Clarify the exact prediction, image or personal meaning.
5 CHECK	Reflect it back; ask whether it fits the experience.

03 Helpful distinctions

Situation	My manager asked to speak to me.
Emotion	Anxious (80/100).
Automatic thought	I have made a mistake; I will be criticised.

Tip: Ask about one meaningful moment rather than a whole difficult week.

Therapist questions: swipe and adapt

Use curious, open prompts; pause and follow the client's language.

01 Find the moment

- What was happening just before you felt that shift?
- Can we slow down and picture that particular moment?
- What did you notice first?

02 Find the words

- What went through your mind just then?
- What were you saying to yourself?
- If that feeling could speak, what might it say?

03 Find images and predictions

- Did a picture or memory flash through your mind?
- What did you think was about to happen?
- What were you afraid this might mean?

04 Clarify the meaning

- What would that say about you, if it were true?
- What felt most upsetting about that possibility?
- Which thought seems most connected to the feeling?

05 Confirm collaboratively

- Would these words capture it, or would you change them?
- How strongly did you believe that thought (0-100)?
- Have we missed another thought that mattered more?

If the client says "I do not know"

Return to the scene, emotion, body cue or image; avoid guessing for them.

Practice template and quick checks

06 A worked example: anxiety before a meeting

Moment	A colleague asks me to present an update.
Feeling	Anxiety 85/100; tight chest.
First answer	"I feel nervous" (emotion, not thought).
Follow-up prompt	"What did you think might happen?"
Automatic thought	"I will stumble and everyone will think I am incompetent."
Belief	75/100 at the time.

07 Try it: one specific event

Situation / moment

Emotion and intensity (0-100)

Exact thought, image or prediction

08 Before moving on: a 5-point check

- [ ] Specific moment identified
- [ ] Feeling separated from thought
- [ ] Client's own wording retained
- [ ] Thought and belief rating checked
- [ ] Client agrees the wording fits

Use sensitively: if distressed or unsafe, prioritise support and clinical judgement.