Behavioural Experiment Design

A collaborative blueprint: test a prediction, not the person.

01 What makes it an experiment?

A behavioural experiment is a planned, observable test of a belief or prediction. The aim is to gather information, not to force a reassuring result or prove the client wrong.

THE EXPERIMENT PATH

1. Identify belief **2. Predict outcome** **3. Plan a fair test** **4. Observe results** **5. Reflect and update**

02 Design checklist: before the task

- [ ] Agree a specific target belief, linked to the formulation and therapy goal.
- [ ] Record the feared prediction in observable terms: what, when and how likely?
- [ ] Agree what would count as supporting, disconfirming or mixed evidence.
- [ ] Choose a feasible task, with informed agreement and appropriate safety planning.
- [ ] Identify safety behaviours and decide which can be reduced safely.
- [ ] Plan when, where, with whom and how observations will be recorded.

THERAPIST PROMPT

"What do you predict will happen, and what could we observe to find out?"

Plan, Test & Observe

Make the prediction testable and keep the learning collaborative.

03 Worked example: fear of speaking up

Situation	Contributing one idea in a team meeting.
Prediction	"If I speak, I will sound foolish and colleagues will criticise me."
Belief rating	80% before the experiment (illustrative).
Test	Offer one prepared idea during a suitable meeting.
Observe	Note actual responses and any assumptions made about others.
Safety behaviours	Notice excessive rehearsal or reassurance-seeking; agree what is feasible to change.
Outcome	Two colleagues responded neutrally; one asked a follow-up question.
Learning	"Speaking up felt uncomfortable, but criticism did not occur this time."

04 Record what happened, not just how it felt

- [ ] What did you actually see or hear? Separate observations from interpretations.
- [ ] What matched the prediction? What did not? Was the outcome mixed?
- [ ] What role did safety behaviours, context or chance play?
- [ ] What else might explain the outcome? What remains uncertain?

IMPORTANT

An experiment may confirm a feared outcome. Respond with curiosity and care; review context and next steps rather than treating it as failure.

Review & Adapt

Use the results to guide the next collaborative step.

05 Debrief and consolidate learning

- [ ] Compare the predicted and observed outcomes without arguing about the evidence.
- [ ] Re-rate belief strength if useful; change is not required for the task to be valuable.
- [ ] Ask what the client learned about the situation, their coping and uncertainty.
- [ ] Agree whether to repeat, vary, simplify or stop the experiment.

06 Troubleshooting: if the test gets stuck

Prediction is vague	Ask: "What exactly would we notice if that happened?"
Task feels overwhelming	Reduce difficulty or rehearse a smaller, meaningful step.
Safety behaviours dominate	Explore their function and adjust one behaviour collaboratively.
Outcome is ambiguous	Record competing explanations; repeat or vary the context.
Client feels worse	Pause, validate, assess safety and revisit the plan and rationale.

07 Mini planning template

Belief / prediction: _____

Agreed test / time / place: _____

What will I observe? _____

What happened? _____

What did I learn / next step?

QUICK REFERENCE

Predict > Plan > Test > Observe > Reflect > Adapt