Collaborative Agenda Setting

CBT SESSION BLUEPRINT / QUICK SWIPE SHEET

A practical, flexible guide for agreeing a useful focus with your client, without turning the session into a rigid checklist.

THE SESSION PATH
Check in → Invite priorities → Agree focus → Allocate time → Review and adapt

01 Start with a brief check-in

Purpose: Notice what has changed and whether anything urgent needs attention before planning the session.

Therapist prompt	What to listen for
“How have things been since we last met?”	Changes in mood, functioning, events or symptoms.
“Is there anything important we need to address first?”	Safety, significant deterioration, immediate concerns.

02 Invite the client’s priorities

Ask first rather than assuming the therapist’s plan is the only priority.

“What would feel most useful for us to focus on today?”
“Is there something from the week you want us to understand or work through?”

03 Bring in the shared treatment plan

Offer relevant links to agreed goals, the formulation and previous between-session practice.

“We also planned to look at what happens when you avoid speaking up. Would that still be helpful today?”

04 Agree a realistic focus

If several issues arise, identify what matters most and what is possible within the time available.

“We have a few important topics. Which one should we start with, and what would be a useful outcome by the end?”

Useful language in the room

Short prompts to adapt to the client's words and needs.

05 Agenda-setting swipe bank

Situation	Collaborative phrase
Client is unsure	"What has been most difficult this week?"
Client brings many topics	"Which one would make the biggest difference to explore today?"
Therapist has a proposed focus	"Could I suggest something linked to your goal, and see what you think?"
Between-session task was not done	"Would it help to understand what got in the way before we move on?"
A new urgent concern appears	"This sounds important. Shall we reconsider our plan for today?"
Client prefers an open discussion	"Could we choose one thread to explore so we leave with something useful?"

06 Use time as a shared resource

Example for a 50-minute session: adjust for risk, complexity, client preference and service requirements.

Part	Illustrative time	Aim
Check-in and priorities	5–10 min	Identify changes and invite topics.
Agree focus	3–5 min	Choose a workable session goal.
Main work	25–30 min	Explore, practise or test an idea.
Summary and next step	5–10 min	Check learning and agree practice.

07 When to change the plan

Pause and renegotiate if risk or safeguarding needs arise, distress makes the planned task unsuitable, or new information changes the clinical priority.
Ask: "Given what has come up, would it be better to focus on this today?"

Agenda-setting practice sheet

Use this page in supervision, role-play or as a session preparation aid.

08 Write a shared agenda

Prompt	Notes / agreed focus
What matters to the client today?	_____ _____
What connects with their goals or formulation?	_____ _____
What will we focus on first?	_____ _____
What would make this session useful?	_____ _____
What can wait or be revisited?	_____ _____

09 Worked example: social anxiety

Client priority: “I keep replaying what I said at work.”
Therapist link: Goal of speaking up more often in team meetings.
Agreed focus: Explore one recent meeting using the CBT model, identify self-focused attention and choose one small behavioural experiment.
Check: “Does that fit what you hoped we would do today?”

10 End-of-session review

Check	Prompt
Shared understanding	“What stands out from our work today?”
Practical next step	“What would you be willing to try before we meet again?”
Feedback	“Was today’s focus helpful, or should we do something differently?”

QUICK REFERENCE
Invite → Prioritise → Agree → Work → Review. A good agenda is negotiated, revisable and linked to what the client wants to change.