Collaborative CBT Session Blueprint

A practical, structured guide for beginner CBT therapists | SelfImproveCoach

01 The purpose of a collaborative session

A useful CBT session balances a clear structure with curiosity, client choice and responsiveness. Agreeing a focus helps link today's work to the shared formulation and the client's goals.

02 The six-stage session pathway

Use this sequence flexibly. A session may need more time for distress, risk, accessibility needs or a rupture in the therapeutic relationship.

Stage	What to do	Useful therapist phrase
1. Check in	Review mood, relevant changes, risk where indicated and previous practice.	"How have things been since we last met?"
2. Agree agenda	Invite priorities, share yours and decide what matters most.	"What would make today useful for you?"
3. Set focus	Choose one workable problem, linked to a goal and formulation.	"Which part would be most helpful to explore?"
4. Explore and practise	Use guided discovery, formulation and an appropriate CBT strategy.	"Could we look at what happened step by step?"
5. Plan practice	Agree a small, specific experiment or observation, with barriers considered.	"What feels realistic to try before we meet?"
6. Summarise and review	Ask the client to summarise learning and invite feedback.	"What stands out, and what should we adjust?"

03 A flexible 50-minute example

Check-in and review: 5–10 min | Agenda and focus: 5 min | Main work: 25–30 min | Practice and feedback: 5–10 min. These are illustrative timings, not a rule.

Clinical priority

If new risk or safeguarding concerns arise, respond according to clinical judgement and local procedures rather than preserving the planned agenda.

Make the session collaborative

Practical prompts, decision points and a worked example

04 Prompts that support shared decision-making

Moment	Try asking
Clarify the agenda	“We have a few possibilities. Which feels most important to you?”
Link to the formulation	“How might this connect with the pattern we have been noticing?”
Check understanding	“Does that fit your experience, or have I missed something?”
Invite alternatives	“What other ways could we make sense of this?”
Check pace	“Is this moving too quickly, too slowly, or about right?”
Close collaboratively	“What was helpful or unhelpful about today’s approach?”

05 When the plan needs to change

If you notice…	Consider…
The client becomes distressed	Pause; validate, check safety and capacity, then agree whether to continue or change focus.
Several competing priorities	Name them, agree one achievable focus, and record others for later.
The client is unsure about the task	Explain the rationale briefly, ask what fits, and offer an alternative.
A rupture or disengagement	Invite feedback without defensiveness and repair the working relationship.

06 Worked example: social anxiety at work

Client goal: Speak up more comfortably in team meetings. **Situation:** Client stayed silent after thinking “They’ll think I’m stupid.” **Shared focus:** Explore the prediction, self-focused attention and avoidance. **In-session practice:** Map the cycle and rehearse one short contribution. **Between-session experiment:** Prepare one question for a low-stakes meeting, record the prediction and what actually happens. **Review:** Explore learning without treating speaking up as a pass/fail test.

Key reminder

Collaboration is more than asking permission: check the client’s understanding, preferences, priorities and feedback throughout the session.

Session-ready planning template

A printable quick reference for preparation, delivery and reflection

07 Before the session

- ■ Review current goals and formulation
- ■ Review relevant measures, previous session and practice
- ■ Identify one tentative focus while staying open to the client's priorities
- ■ Consider access needs, risk and safeguarding responsibilities

08 During the session: brief notes

Prompt	Notes
Client's priority	_____
Agreed focus / goal	_____
Maintaining cycle or key learning	_____
Intervention / practice	_____
Between-session plan: what, when, how	_____
Likely barrier and adjustment	_____

09 After the session: quality check

- ■ Did we agree a meaningful agenda together?
- ■ Was the work linked to the formulation and the client's goal?
- ■ Did I check understanding, emotional impact and pace?
- ■ Was the between-session plan realistic and specific?
- ■ Did I invite feedback and record what needs revisiting?

10 Quick reference

Check in → **Agree** → **Focus** → **Explore and practise** → **Plan** → **Review.** A good session is purposeful, adaptable and shaped with the client. If an intervention does not fit, that is information to explore rather than a reason to push harder.

Educational resource for qualified or supervised clinical use; adapt to the client, service guidance and clinical context.