FIVE AREAS FORMULATION

Quick Reference | A collaborative CBT blueprint for beginner therapists

1 What is the Five Areas model?

A practical way to explore how a **situation** connects with **thoughts, emotions, physical sensations and behaviours**. The four responses can influence one another, creating a maintaining cycle. Use the client's own words; this is a working hypothesis, not a diagnosis.

2 The five areas at a glance

AREA	ASK	EXAMPLE: meeting at work
1 Situation / context	What happened? When and where?	Manager asks me to speak in a meeting.
2 Thoughts / meanings	What went through your mind?	"I will sound foolish."
3 Emotions	What did you feel? How strongly?	Anxiety 80/100; embarrassment.
4 Physical sensations	What happened in your body?	Heart racing, hot face, tense shoulders.
5 Behaviours	What did you do or avoid?	Stay silent; rehearse sentences; leave early.

3 Understand the maintaining cycle

Situation → "I will sound foolish" → anxiety and racing heart → staying silent → little opportunity to learn that speaking may be manageable → the original prediction remains untested.

Clinical tip: Ask what happens in the short term and longer term. A behaviour may bring immediate relief while maintaining fear over time.

BUILD THE FORMULATION

Use this six-stage conversation, flexibly and collaboratively.

4 Six-stage formulation pathway

STAGE	SAMPLE THERAPIST PHRASE
1. Choose a recent moment	“Could we take one specific example from this week?”
2. Describe the situation	“Where were you, who was there, and what happened?”
3. Explore internal responses	“What did you think, feel emotionally and notice physically?”
4. Map actions and consequences	“What did you do next? What happened immediately and later?”
5. Draw links and check fit	“Does this picture capture your experience? What is missing?”
6. Identify a testable target	“Which link might we gently explore or change first?”

5 Helpful guided-discovery prompts

THOUGHTS	EMOTIONS & BODY
“What did that mean to you?” “How convinced were you at the time?”	“What emotion fits best?” “Where did you notice it in your body?”
BEHAVIOURS	CONTEXT & IMPACT
“Did you avoid, check, seek reassurance or push through?” “What did that do for you?”	“What else was happening in your life?” “How did this affect what matters to you?”

6 Link formulation to intervention

Choose the intervention from the **individual maintenance pattern**, not the diagram alone. Examples: test a feared prediction with a behavioural experiment; reduce avoidance in a graded, supported way; practise noticing and evaluating thoughts; review coping responses that offer short-term relief but long-term cost.

Safety and accessibility: Consider risk, trauma, culture, neurodivergence, physical health and reasonable accommodations. Do not treat genuine safety measures as unnecessary “safety behaviours”.

USE IT IN SESSION

7 Worked example: social anxiety

AREA	COLLABORATIVE SUMMARY
Situation	A colleague asks for my view in a team meeting.
Thoughts	“If I hesitate, everyone will think I am incompetent.”
Emotions	Anxiety (80/100), shame (55/100).
Physical sensations	Fast heartbeat, flushed face, shaky voice.
Behaviours	Avoid eye contact, say little, mentally rehearse.
Short-term / long-term	Less immediate discomfort / fewer chances to discover that imperfect contributions can be accepted.

8 What could we try?

Shared hypothesis: Anticipating criticism increases anxiety and encourages silence, leaving the prediction largely untested.

Possible experiment: Contribute one brief point in a suitable meeting; note the predicted outcome beforehand, observe what actually happens, and review what was learned. Agree a manageable step and adapt to the client’s circumstances.

9 Reusable session mini-template

PROMPT	WRITE YOUR NOTES
Situation / context	_____
Thoughts and meaning	_____
Emotions and intensity	_____
Physical sensations	_____
Actions / avoidance	_____
Short- and long-term effects	_____
Shared hypothesis / next step	_____

10 Final quick-reference check

■ Used the client’s language ■ Included all five areas ■ Checked the links together
■ Considered context and safety ■ Identified a meaningful goal ■ Agreed a feasible next step

Remember: The model supports curiosity and shared understanding. Revise it when new information emerges.