FIVE Ps CASE FORMULATION

A collaborative CBT cheat sheet | Beginner therapist reference

01 What is a Five Ps formulation?

A Five Ps formulation organises information about a person's difficulties into five connected areas. It is a working hypothesis, developed with the client and revised as new information emerges. It is not a diagnosis or a fixed explanation.

02 The Five Ps at a glance

Component	Core question	Illustrative example
Presenting problems	What is happening now, and how does it affect life?	Avoiding team meetings; anxiety before speaking
Predisposing factors	What earlier experiences or vulnerabilities may have increased susceptibility?	Past experiences of criticism; longstanding self-doubt
Precipitating factors	What appears to have triggered the current difficulty?	A difficult presentation at work
Perpetuating factors	What keeps the problem going now?	Avoidance, rehearsal, self-focused attention, post-event rumination
Protective factors	What strengths, resources and supports could help?	Supportive colleague, motivation, previous coping successes

03 How the parts connect

Background vulnerability + **recent trigger** → **current difficulty** ↔ **maintaining responses**. **Protective factors** may interrupt the cycle and support change. The arrows represent possible relationships, not proven causation.

Clinical tip: Ask what the client agrees with, what is missing and whether the formulation fits their lived experience.

BUILD THE FORMULATION

A six-stage collaborative workflow

04 Step-by-step blueprint

Stage	Therapist action	Useful prompt
1. Define	Agree one specific problem and its impact.	“Which difficulty would be most useful to understand first?”
2. Map the present	Identify triggers, thoughts, emotions, bodily responses and actions.	“Can we walk through a recent example?”
3. Explore context	Ask about relevant earlier and recent influences, without assuming causes.	“When did you first notice this becoming difficult?”
4. Identify maintenance	Look for short-term relief and longer-term costs.	“What happens just after you avoid it, and later?”
5. Find resources	Identify strengths, relationships, values and helpful experiences.	“What has helped, even a little?”
6. Check and refine	Summarise links, invite correction and agree a testable next step.	“What fits, and what would you change?”

05 Questions to deepen understanding

Presenting: What is the main difficulty? When, where and with whom does it arise?
Predisposing: Which earlier experiences might be relevant, if any?
Precipitating: What changed around the time this became more difficult?
Perpetuating: What brings immediate relief but may maintain the cycle?
Protective: Who or what supports coping, meaning and progress?

06 Common formulation pitfalls

Avoid treating an assumption as a fact; overemphasising childhood history; missing practical or systemic barriers; confusing a trigger with a maintaining factor; and overlooking protective factors. Revisit risk and safeguarding separately in line with clinical procedures.

FROM FORMULATION TO ACTION

Worked example, planning template and final review

07 Worked example: social anxiety at work

P	Collaborative hypothesis
Presenting	Anxiety and avoidance during team meetings; reduced participation.
Predisposing	A history of harsh criticism may contribute to fears of negative evaluation.
Precipitating	A recent meeting where the client stumbled over their words.
Perpetuating	Avoiding contributions reduces immediate discomfort but limits opportunities to test feared predictions; rumination increases self-doubt.
Protective	Willingness to try small steps; a trusted colleague; strong work skills.

08 Link to a practical CBT intervention

Hypothesis: “If I speak, everyone will think I am incompetent.” **Collaborative test:** Offer one brief comment in a lower-stakes meeting, reduce excessive rehearsal where appropriate, and compare predicted with observed outcomes. Adapt to accessibility needs and actual workplace safety.

09 Reusable formulation notes

Area	Client-specific notes / evidence to explore
Presenting problems	_____
Predisposing factors	_____
Precipitating factors	_____
Perpetuating factors	_____
Protective factors	_____
Agreed next step	_____

10 Before you finish

■ Does the client recognise this account? ■ Are links hypotheses rather than certainties?
■ Have we included context, strengths and protective factors? ■ Is there a clear next step?
■ What new information would lead us to revise the formulation?

Remember: Formulation is a shared map for understanding and action—not a label or a verdict.