Incomplete Between-Session Practice

Troubleshooting Guide | A collaborative CBT blueprint

Core principle: Uncompleted practice is information, not failure. Explore what happened without blame, then adapt the task to the client's formulation, goals and circumstances.

01 Start with curiosity, not compliance

Try: "We planned to try this between sessions. How did it go?" Follow with: "What got in the way?" and "What would make it more workable?" Avoid assuming that non-completion means low motivation.

02 The 6-step troubleshooting pathway

Stage	Therapist action
1 Ask	Invite the client's account of what happened, including any partial attempts.
2 Clarify	Check the original task: purpose, instructions, timing and difficulty.
3 Formulate	Explore thoughts, emotions, avoidance, practical barriers and contextual factors.
4 Adapt	Agree a smaller, clearer or different task linked to the same goal.
5 Rehearse	Practise a brief version together; check understanding and confidence.
6 Review	Agree how learning will be noticed and revisit next session.

03 Questions that reveal the barrier

"When did you first think about doing it?" • "What went through your mind at that moment?" • "Was the task clear and relevant?" • "What competing demands or access needs mattered?" • "Was any part of it possible?"

Clinical safeguard: Check distress, risk, capacity and whether the task was appropriate. Do not frame necessary accommodations, safety precautions or inability to access resources as resistance.

TROUBLESHOOTING MATRIX

04 Match the obstacle to a useful response

What you notice	What to explore	Collaborative adjustment
“I forgot.”	No cue, overloaded schedule, unclear routine.	Attach a 2-minute step to an existing routine; agree a reminder if wanted.
“I didn’t know what to write.”	Instructions too abstract; literacy or language mismatch.	Model one example together; use voice notes, ticks or a brief prompt.
“It felt overwhelming.”	Task too large; high distress; perfectionistic rules.	Reduce scope, duration or frequency; plan support and pacing.
“I was scared to try.”	Feared outcome, avoidance, uncertainty, safety concerns.	Explore prediction and safety; collaboratively design an appropriate graded step.
“It didn’t seem useful.”	Weak link to goals or formulation; poor fit.	Explain the rationale; invite a better alternative or drop the task.
“I ran out of time.”	Work, caring, fatigue, competing priorities.	Agree a realistic opportunity; use a brief in-session practice instead.
“I did some, not all.”	All-or-nothing standards or overly ambitious target.	Recognise partial learning; review what was feasible and adjust.

05 Separate different kinds of barriers

Practical: time, privacy, materials, access, competing demands.
Cognitive / emotional: “I’ll get it wrong”, shame, fear, uncertainty.
Therapy fit: unclear purpose, task too difficult, not collaboratively chosen.
Contextual: disability, neurodivergent needs, fatigue, cultural or language factors.

06 A quick decision rule

Task unsafe or unsuitable? Stop and review clinically. **Task unclear?** Demonstrate it. **Too difficult?** Grade it down. **Not relevant?** Reconnect with the goal or choose a different approach. **Partly completed?** Review the learning already available.

PUT THE BLUEPRINT INTO PRACTICE

07 Worked example: social anxiety

Original task: Ask a question in a team meeting and record the predicted versus actual response.
What happened: Client remained silent and did not complete the record.
Exploration: “Everyone will think I’m foolish”; anxiety rose, and the task felt too big.
Revised plan: Practise asking one question in a role-play, then consider a smaller real-life step agreed together.
Review focus: What was predicted? What happened? What did the client learn? What remains uncertain?

08 Ready-to-use review prompts

“What did you notice when you considered the task?” • “What was the hardest part?” • “Did anything help, even a little?” • “What did we learn about the plan?” • “What would be a fairer-sized next step?”

09 Collaborative replanning template

Prompt	Notes to agree together
Practice goal / why it matters	_____
Barrier or prediction	_____
Smallest useful next step	_____
When / where / support needed	_____
What to notice or record	_____
Next-session review question	_____

10 Before the client leaves

■ The client can explain the task in their own words. ■ It links to an agreed goal.
■ Difficulty and access needs were considered. ■ A realistic time/place is identified.
■ There is a plan for obstacles. ■ Partial attempts will be reviewed without blame.

Takeaway: Ask → Understand → Adapt → Rehearse → Review. The purpose is meaningful learning between sessions, not perfect task completion.