Rules & Assumptions

A practical guide to identifying the hidden rules behind automatic thoughts

1 What are rules and assumptions?

Intermediate beliefs are personal rules and conditional expectations that shape how someone interprets situations and responds. Common forms include “If… then…”, “I must…” and “I should…”. Some are useful; rigid rules may contribute to distress.

2 Spot the language

Rules: “I must never disappoint anyone.” “I should always be in control.”
Assumptions: “If I make a mistake, people will reject me.”
Attitudes: “Showing weakness is unacceptable.”
Treat these as possible hypotheses, not labels to impose.

3 How they fit into a CBT formulation

Core belief: “I am inadequate” → Rule: “I must perform perfectly” → Trigger: making a small error → Thought: “They will think I am useless” → Response: anxiety, overchecking and avoidance → Short-term relief: less uncertainty; long-term cost: the rule remains untested.

4 When to explore them

Look for repeated patterns across situations, harsh self-demands, perfectionism, people-pleasing, avoidance or safety behaviours. Begin with the client’s current concerns and agree together whether exploring a deeper rule would help their goal.

Clinical reminder

A coping rule is not automatically unhelpful. Explore its purpose, context, flexibility and cost before considering change.

Explore the Rule

Six collaborative stages • prompts for guided discovery

1 Anchor in a recent moment

“What happened just before you felt that?” “What went through your mind?”

2 Notice the repeated demand

“What did you feel you had to do?” “Is there a must, should or never here?”

3 Explore the feared consequence

“If you did not follow that rule, what do you fear might happen?”

4 Put the assumption into words

“Would it fit to say: If I ___, then ___?” Check the client’s own wording.

5 Examine costs and exceptions

“When does this rule help? When does it restrict you? Are there exceptions?”

6 Develop a flexible alternative

“What guideline would be more workable and believable? How could we test it?”

Keep the conversation collaborative

Ask permission, allow pauses and check your understanding. Do not assume every client has a single underlying rule; avoid turning guided discovery into interrogation.

Apply & Review

Worked example • collaborative questions • troubleshooting • session template

7 Worked example: social anxiety

Situation: Speaking in a team meeting.
Automatic thought: “They will think I sound foolish.”
Possible assumption: “If I cannot speak perfectly, people will judge me.”
Maintaining behaviour: Rehearsing excessively and staying silent.
Flexible alternative: “I can contribute even when my words are imperfect.”
Possible experiment: Offer one brief comment, notice reactions and review learning.

8 Collaborative review questions

“How strongly do you believe the rule (0–100%)?”
“What evidence supports it? What suggests it is not always true?”
“What would you say to someone you cared about?”
“What small, safe action could test a more flexible rule?”

9 If exploration gets stuck

Rule feels true: Validate its history; look for context and exceptions.
Cannot identify a rule: Return to a concrete example; keep the hypothesis open.
Strong emotion: Slow down, ground and agree whether to continue.
Alternative feels fake: Aim for a credible, modest statement.

10 Quick-use session template

Situation / trigger: _____
Automatic thought: _____
Possible rule / assumption: _____
What does it protect against? _____
Cost / exception / alternative: _____
Small test and review date: _____