Safety Behaviours Identification Prompt Sheet

A collaborative CBT blueprint for noticing what people do to prevent feared outcomes - and exploring whether those actions keep threat beliefs going.

Clinical distinction

A safety behaviour is an action used to prevent or reduce a feared outcome. The same action may be sensible, protective, accessible or clinically appropriate in another context. Explore its function rather than labelling it by appearance.

01 Recognise the maintaining cycle

Trigger	Prediction	Safety behaviour	Short-term effect	Possible longer-term effect
Meeting at work	“I will sound foolish.”	Rehearse every sentence; avoid eye contact	Less immediate uncertainty	Little chance to discover how others respond without rehearsing

02 Spot overt and subtle behaviours

Visible / behavioural	Covert / mental	Interpersonal / reassurance
Leaving early; sitting near exits; overpreparing; avoiding questions	Mentally rehearsing; monitoring symptoms; checking for mistakes	Repeatedly asking “Was that okay?”; seeking someone else to speak; checking reactions

03 First questions to ask

“What were you worried might happen?” • “What did you do to stop that happening?” • “What would have felt risky about not doing it?”

Therapist tip

Validate the intention: “That sounds like a way of protecting yourself when the situation feels threatening.” Avoid implying that all coping strategies are problematic.

From behaviour to shared understanding

04 Six-stage guided discovery pathway

01 Anchor a recent situation

Choose one specific episode: where, when, with whom?

02 Identify the feared prediction

What did the client expect others, their body or the situation to do?

03 Name the protective response

What did they do before, during and afterwards to prevent it?

04 Explore the immediate payoff

What changed in anxiety, uncertainty or perceived control?

05 Consider the learning cost

What remains untested? Could the behaviour itself have affected the outcome?

06 Agree what to examine next

Collaboratively decide whether a small, safe experiment would be useful.

05 Distinguish protection from avoidance

Ask: “Would this action still be useful if you did not fear the predicted outcome?” Consider genuine risks, disability accommodations, trauma context, culture and practical constraints before suggesting any change.

Apply, review and adapt

06 Worked example: social anxiety

Step	Collaborative example
Situation	Contributing an idea in a team meeting
Feared prediction	“If I pause, everyone will think I am incompetent.”
Safety behaviours	Reading a prepared script, speaking quickly, checking colleagues’ expressions
Short-term payoff	Feels more controlled; less exposed
Possible cost	Client attributes success to the script and continues to fear unscripted speaking
Possible experiment	With agreement, offer one brief comment using notes rather than a full script; observe responses and learning

07 Practical prompts for a small experiment

“Which one behaviour could we gently vary?” • “What do you predict would happen?” • “How could we check fairly?” • “What would make this safe and manageable?”

08 When the plan is not working

Observation	Useful response
Client cannot identify any safety behaviour	Replay a recent moment slowly; ask about actions, attention and mental strategies.
Client feels criticised	Return to validation and shared curiosity; avoid “you must stop” language.
Anxiety rises during a change	Review pace, consent, prediction, genuine risk and support needs.
Behaviour is needed for safety or accessibility	Retain it; do not remove essential protection or accommodations.

09 Session-end quick check

■ Specific trigger identified ■ Feared outcome stated in client’s words ■ Behaviour and function explored ■ Genuine safety needs considered ■ Learning question agreed ■ Next step collaborative

Key takeaway

Ask not just “What did you do?” but “What did you hope it would prevent - and what did it stop you learning?” The aim is flexible choice and new learning, not eliminating every coping strategy.