Session Pacing & Time Management Guide

A practical CBT session blueprint for maintaining focus, collaboration and a useful ending. Timing is a flexible guide, not a rigid rule.

1 What good pacing looks like

A well-paced session balances the client's priorities with a clear therapeutic purpose. It allows enough time to understand, practise, reflect and agree what happens next. Adjust for risk, accessibility needs, emotional intensity and the client's preferences.

2 Example 50-minute session map

Time	Purpose	Therapist task
0–5 min	Check-in and priorities	Brief wellbeing/risk check where indicated; ask what matters today.
5–10 min	Agree agenda	Review previous practice and select a manageable focus.
10–30 min	Focused work	Use formulation to guide exploration, intervention and in-session practice.
30–40 min	Consolidate learning	Check understanding, review learning and plan practice.
40–50 min	Close collaboratively	Summarise, seek feedback, agree next steps and document key decisions.

Timing note: These are illustrative allocations, not a clinical protocol. Some sessions require a different structure.

3 A 6-stage pacing blueprint

Stage	Action
1. Prepare	Identify the session goal and likely time demands before starting.
2. Prioritise	Agree one main focus; park lower-priority items with permission.
3. Signpost	Explain transitions and check the client is comfortable with the plan.
4. Monitor	Notice time, emotional intensity and whether the work is useful.
5. Adapt	Slow down, narrow the task or change direction when clinically needed.
6. Close	Reserve time for shared learning, practice planning and feedback.

Pacing in the moment

4 Useful therapist phrases

Situation	Collaborative phrase
Setting the agenda	“We have several important things here. Which would be most helpful to focus on today?”
Time check	“We have about 15 minutes left. Shall we draw together what we have learned?”
Going into detail	“I want to give this enough attention. Would it help to choose one example?”
A new concern emerges	“This sounds important. Do we need to address it now, or plan time for it next session?”
Moving to practice	“Could we try a short example together and see what you notice?”
Closing	“What stands out, and what would you like to take into the week?”

5 Decision points: when to change pace

If you notice…	Consider…
Client is overwhelmed or disengaged	Pause, validate, check understanding and agree a smaller next step.
Discussion is circling	Summarise the pattern; reconnect to the formulation and agreed goal.
Too many agenda items	Prioritise collaboratively; defer rather than rush through everything.
A significant safety concern	Shift to appropriate risk assessment, safeguarding or crisis procedures; do not prioritise the timetable.
The session is running late	Name the time limit respectfully, agree an immediate focus and plan follow-up.

6 Quick mid-session check

Ask yourself: **Are we working on the agreed goal?** Is the client actively involved? Are we learning something useful? Is there enough time to consolidate and close?

Apply, review and refine

7 Worked example: social anxiety

Scenario: A client arrives wanting to discuss three stressful work interactions. The session is at risk of becoming a detailed retelling of each event.

Moment	Pacing response
Agenda	Agree to focus on one interaction that best illustrates the client's fear of negative evaluation.
Focused work	Identify prediction, self-focused attention and safety behaviours; test an alternative response.
Time check	At the agreed point, summarise what the example shows and invite corrections.
Closing	Plan one small experiment for the week; ask how useful the session felt.

8 Common pacing traps

Trap	Helpful adjustment
Overloading psychoeducation	Teach one concept and check its relevance to the client's experience.
Therapist-driven agenda	Invite the client's priorities and negotiate the focus.
Rushing through distress	Allow time for emotional processing; use clinical judgement.
No closing summary	Protect a brief review even if the planned task remains unfinished.
Rigid clock-watching	Use time awareness without sacrificing safety, empathy or collaboration.

9 Reusable session planning checklist

- ■ My purpose for this session is clear and linked to the formulation.
- ■ I have invited the client's priorities and agreed a focus.
- ■ I have planned one realistic in-session task.
- ■ I will monitor engagement, time and emerging needs.
- ■ I have allowed time for review, feedback and next steps.
- ■ I will reflect on what to adjust next time.

10 Takeaway

Structure supports collaboration; it should never replace it. A purposeful session does not need to cover everything. Focus on one useful piece of work, notice when to adapt, and finish with a shared understanding of the next step.