

Essential Quick Reference

A practical bank for deeper cognitive restructuring.

Help clients discover meaning, weigh information and choose their next step.

ASK WITH CURIOSITY

Choose one prompt. Listen, reflect and summarise before asking another. Follow the client's answer; a different conclusion is allowed. Here, guided discovery means helping the client develop their own understanding.

FIND YOUR ENTRY POINT

Stage → 01-12 | Thinking pattern → 13-36 | Readiness → 37-47

01 / OPEN & CLARIFY

Start here when the client is willing to explore one specific moment.

- 01 Which moment would be most useful to look at together?
- 02 What went through your mind at that moment?
- 03 What did that thought mean to you?
- 04 How strongly did you believe it, from 0 to 100?

02 / EXPLORE & BROADEN

Use in the middle of a dialogue; gather information before drawing conclusions.

- 05 What did you notice that led you to that conclusion?
- 06 What information does not fit that conclusion?
- 07 What other explanation is possible, even if it feels unlikely?
- 08 What would help us compare those explanations fairly?

03 / INTEGRATE & PLAN

Use near the end; let the client put learning into their own words.

- 09 Looking at what we have discussed, what stands out to you?
- 10 How would you describe your view now, in your own words?
- 11 What small, safe step could help you test that view?
- 12 What will you look for, and when shall we review it?

BUILD AN ACCURATE, BALANCED VIEW

PROMPTS 13-36

Match the thinking pattern

Use when the client is ready to explore. Labels are for your reference; ask about their experience rather than telling them which “trap” they are in.

E = EXPLORE INFORMATION I = INTEGRATE A NEW VIEW P = PLAN A TEST

All-or-nothing thinking

Explore a middle ground between two extremes.

- 13** E What counts as success here, and how did you decide?
- 14** E Where would this sit between complete failure and complete success?
- 15** I What would “good enough” look like in this situation?
- 16** P What could you learn by trying a good-enough version?

Catastrophising

Separate a feared outcome from its likelihood and coping.

- 17** E What outcome are you most afraid of?
- 18** E What suggests it is likely, and what suggests it is less likely?
- 19** I If it did happen, what support or coping options would you have?
- 20** P What small, safe test could give you useful information?

Mind reading & prediction

Separate observations from guesses about people or events.

- 21** E What did you directly observe, and what did you infer?
- 22** E What other reasons might explain their response?
- 23** E What are you predicting, and how could we tell what happened?
- 24** P How could you gather information without seeking certainty?

Overgeneralising & labelling

Examine a broad rule or identity claim in context.

- 25** E Which events are you drawing this conclusion from?
- 26** E When has the pattern been different, even slightly?
- 27** I What would describe the event without labelling your whole self?
- 28** P How does that description change your next step?

Mental filter & discounting

Bring overlooked information into a balanced picture.

- 29** E What part of the situation has held your attention most?
- 30** E What else happened that we have not considered yet?
- 31** E What makes the positive information hard to count?
- 32** I What view includes the difficulty and what went well?

Rules, feelings & blame

Personalisation, “shoulds” and emotional reasoning.

- 33** E Which parts were under your control, and which were not?
- 34** E Where did this “should” rule come from, and how does it help or hinder?
- 35** E What can this feeling tell us, and what can it not establish?
- 36** I What fairer expectation would still respect what matters to you?

If the concern reflects real harm or unfairness, explore support, protection or problem-solving.

PROMPTS 37-47

When dialogue gets stuck

“Resistance” can signal overwhelm, uncertainty or feeling misunderstood. Check the fit of your approach before increasing the pressure.

HESITANT / RESTORE CHOICE

Opening or repair stage. Validate the difficulty; invite rather than persuade.

- 37 What feels difficult about looking at this thought together?
- 38 What would make this conversation feel more useful to you?
- 39 Would you prefer to explore it, pause, or choose another focus?

UNCERTAIN / MAKE IT CONCRETE

Exploration stage. Use a recent example and give time to think.

- 40 Which recent example comes closest to what you mean?
- 41 What was happening just before the thought appeared?
- 42 What part feels clear, and what part is harder to put into words?
- 43 How could I ask this in a way that makes more sense to you?

STRONGLY CONVINCED / UNDERSTAND FIRST

Exploration to integration. Respect conviction; do not debate it.

- 44 What experiences make this belief feel so convincing?
- 45 What do you want me to understand before we look at other views?
- 46 What information, if any, would lead you to reconsider part of it?
- 47 If your view stays the same today, what useful step could we still take?

THREE USEFUL DISTINCTIONS

Observation: what happened. Interpretation: what it means. Prediction: what you expect next. Explore each separately.

Belief strength measures conviction, not truth. A balanced view can include difficulty and uncertainty. Insight may involve a clearer understanding even without a lower belief rating.

PRACTICE NOTE & SOURCE BASIS

Original example prompts, not a validated scale or a substitute for CBT training and supervision. Adapt to language, culture, formulation and current safety needs.

Principles informed by: UCL, CBT competence framework, “Guided Discovery and Socratic Questioning”; Beck Institute, “Why CBT Therapists Don’t Challenge Thoughts” and “Selecting Techniques in CBT”; NICE CG31 (reassurance-seeking). These organisations have not endorsed this resource.