

Agree a workable starting point

Begin with a shared focus and a specific episode. The stages below are flexible; return to an earlier stage when the client's answer calls for it.

01 / Choose the episode

Entry: The client identifies a current difficulty that matters to them. Agree whether exploring a thought is useful today.

Action: Locate a recent moment: where they were, what happened and what they did next. Keep one episode in view.

Milestone: Both of you can describe the same situation without merging several events. If the account stays broad, use a brief timeline.



02 / Locate the meaning

Action: Elicit the thought, image or personal meaning. Use the client's words; separate the emotion from the prediction or conclusion.

Fictional example: "I felt anxious" becomes "When my manager paused, I thought she had lost confidence in me."

Milestone: A specific belief is available to explore. If the client cannot identify words, a remembered image or sense of meaning may be a better entry.



03 / Agree what you are exploring

Choose: Is the question about what happened, what it means, what might happen next, or how the client could respond?

Capture: Record belief strength if useful, along with the emotion, urge and immediate behaviour. A rating is optional, not proof of accuracy.

Decision: If current danger or practical adversity needs attention, prioritise the appropriate safety or problem-solving response. If willing, continue to exploration.

STARTING POINT → ONE EPISODE + ONE CLIENT-OWNED MEANING

Clinical basis: UCL CBT competence framework; Beck Institute, "Why CBT Therapists Don't Challenge Thoughts" and "Selecting Techniques in CBT". Original educational examples; adapt within training and supervision.

Explore without forcing an answer

The middle of the dialogue is a listening task as much as a questioning task.

04 / Gather a fuller picture

Action: Ask for observations supporting the conclusion, then information that complicates it. Take both seriously.

Dependency: Explore alternatives after the client feels their account has been heard. Reflect the answer before moving on.

Decision: If the client corrects your understanding, revise it. If they become quieter or defensive, check the impact of the questioning rather than adding more evidence.



05 / Compare plausible explanations

Action: Invite possibilities and examine what each explains. Do not require the client to choose the most reassuring interpretation.

Fictional example: The manager's pause could reflect concern about the work, distraction or time pressure. The client has not yet established which applies.

Milestone: The client can distinguish what they know from what remains uncertain. A useful outcome may be "I cannot tell yet."



06 / Build a synthesis

Action: Summarise the information the client contributed, including unresolved facts. Invite them to connect it with the original thought.

Output: A statement in their own language. For example: "The pause alone does not tell me what she thinks; I can look at the feedback on my work."

Decision: If the statement sounds borrowed, return to the part the client doubts. Agreement with the therapist is not the endpoint.

MIDDLE POINT → A FULLER PICTURE + A VIEW THE CLIENT CAN OWN

Clinical basis: UCL CBT competence framework; Beck Institute, "Why CBT Therapists Don't Challenge Thoughts" and "Selecting Techniques in CBT". Original educational examples; adapt within training and supervision.

Turn understanding into learning

A practical next step should follow the client's goal and the shared formulation.

07 / Choose the next action

If testable: Agree a small behavioural experiment. Specify the action, the prediction and the observable outcome before starting.

Fictional example: "If I contribute one idea at the routine meeting, someone will openly criticise it." Observe the response; do not try to infer everyone's private thoughts.

If not testable: Consider coping, problem-solving, acceptance of uncertainty or another formulation-led intervention. A test is not compulsory.



08 / Make the plan workable

Agree: Where and when the action will happen, how observations will be recorded and when you will review them.

Check: Proportionality, consent, feasibility and relevant safety needs. Discuss any coping or safety behaviour that could alter what the test teaches.

Milestone: The client can describe the plan and its purpose. If the task is too large, reduce the scope while retaining a meaningful learning question.



09 / Review and update

Compare: Prediction versus observations. Ask what was learned, including ambiguous or disappointing findings.

Update: Revise the explanation, the action or the test. Do not treat a difficult outcome as evidence of personal failure.

Close: Record the client's learning and next step. A fuller picture, greater choice or a workable coping plan can be valuable when conviction remains high.

ENDPOINT → CLIENT-OWNED LEARNING + AN AGREED NEXT STEP

Clinical basis: UCL CBT competence framework; Beck Institute, "Why CBT Therapists Don't Challenge Thoughts" and "Selecting Techniques in CBT". Original educational examples; adapt within training and supervision.