

Exercise 1 – Problem Statements

The problem list is the starting point for the CBT process. People often start therapy without a clear articulation of the specific problems that they want to work on. Whilst we usually recognise distressing feelings as a first indication that we are struggling to cope effectively, the problem list pinpoints the specific factors that maintain this distress or cause impairment in our personal or professional life.

The problem is not the distressing feeling itself, but the factors that keep the distressing feeling going. For this reason, it is helpful to express the problem in terms of unhelpful thinking patterns and behaviours, knowledge or skills gaps. It is these factors that CBT will focus on during the treatment process.

Use the first column to identify the problems that you want to work on. In the second column describe the unhelpful or unworkable thinking patterns and behaviours. In the third column, outline any skills or knowledge gaps that limit your understanding of the problem. Examples of problem statements are outlined below:

The Problem	Unhelpful / Unworkable Behaviours	What I Don't Know or Understand
Panic attacks and anxiety	Avoiding groups, public transport, social events, exercise, situations where I am in the spotlight or far from home. Continuously asking for reassurance, looking things up on the internet, visiting the GP, worrying that I will faint or collapse, Worrying about my health.	Why panic attacks are happening. Why I can't stop them. Why I feel physically weak and unwell. What I need to do to prevent them from happening.
Low Personal Confidence	Submissive and passive behaviour with work colleagues, friends and my partner at home. Working excessive hours. Sacrificing my own needs to please other people. Constantly comparing my achievements with other people's situations. Criticising myself, procrastinating	Why I try to please or prove myself to others. Not knowing how to be assertive. Not knowing how to communicate my own needs without disappointing other people.
Depressed mood	Avoiding and withdrawing from activities. Disengaging from family and friends. Negatively comparing myself with other people. Continuously criticising myself for my past decisions. Thinking about the things that have gone wrong in my life.	Not knowing why I feel so low and upset. Not knowing what to do to lift my mood. Not understanding what causes the depression or why I feel this way.

Now try to identify your own problem statements following the examples shown above:

The Problem	Unhelpful / Unworkable Behaviours	What I Don't Know or Understand