

Therapist Guide: Examining Alternative Explanations Worksheet

Purpose & Rationale

This worksheet helps clients challenge rigid, negative, or biased interpretations of situations by generating multiple alternative explanations. Many distressing thoughts are maintained by cognitive distortions such as *mind reading*, *fortune telling*, and *catastrophizing*. By deliberately brainstorming other possible explanations and then allocating “slices” of likelihood on a pie chart, clients practice **cognitive flexibility**, reduce conviction in their initial interpretation, and adopt more balanced perspectives.

This technique is especially useful in CBT for anxiety, depression, social anxiety, and interpersonal difficulties, where misinterpretations of events drive strong emotional responses.

When to Use

- When clients quickly jump to the “worst-case” explanation for an event.
- For social anxiety (e.g., “*They didn’t text back because they don’t like me*”).
- For depression (e.g., “*I didn’t get invited because nobody cares about me*”).
- In trauma-focused work when current triggers activate old assumptions.
- To support cognitive restructuring when clients struggle to disconfirm their automatic thought.

How to Introduce It

1. **Explain the rationale:**
 - “*Often our mind comes up with one explanation for a situation and we treat it as fact. This exercise helps us step back, generate other possible explanations, and see if our first thought is the only explanation—or just one of many.*”
2. **Identify the situation and initial explanation:**
 - Have the client write down a recent triggering event and their first interpretation (e.g., “*My boss frowned, so she must be disappointed in me.*”).
3. **Generate alternative explanations:**
 - Encourage the client to come up with at least 3–5 other possibilities, no matter how small or unlikely.
 - Example alternatives: “*She was tired,*” “*She was concentrating on something else,*” “*She had a headache.*”
4. **Assign “pie chart” likelihoods:**
 - Starting with the last alternative, give it a percentage of likelihood.
 - Work backward until each explanation has a “slice” of the pie.
 - Finally, assign a slice to the original explanation.
5. **Re-rate belief in the original explanation:**
 - After comparing multiple explanations, ask the client: “*How strongly do you believe your original explanation now?*”
 - Encourage reflection on how certainty has shifted.



6. Discuss insights:

- Review what the exercise shows about cognitive flexibility.
- Reinforce that strong feelings don't necessarily mean one interpretation is the only or most accurate one.

Therapeutic Goals

- Challenge automatic negative interpretations of ambiguous situations.
- Increase awareness of cognitive distortions (e.g., mind reading, catastrophizing).
- Foster flexible, balanced thinking.
- Reduce emotional distress by broadening perspective.
- Strengthen problem-solving and tolerance for uncertainty.

👉 **Clinical Tip:** Some clients may initially dismiss alternative explanations as “excuses.” Normalize this reaction, then highlight that we often never have full certainty about why events happen—and being open to multiple possibilities reduces unnecessary distress.