

Responsibility Pie – Therapist Guide

Purpose and Rationale:

The Responsibility Pie exercise helps clients examine an event that evokes guilt, shame, or self-blame. By visually allocating responsibility among all contributing factors, clients can gain a more balanced and realistic perspective of the situation. This promotes cognitive restructuring by countering overgeneralized or distorted thinking such as “It was all my fault.” It is particularly useful in treating depression, trauma, and perfectionism—contexts in which clients often assume excessive personal responsibility.

When to Use This Worksheet

Use this exercise when a client:

- Expresses persistent guilt, shame, or self-criticism about a specific event.
- Struggles to differentiate between accountability and self-blame.
- Demonstrates all-or-nothing thinking or magnification of fault.
- Needs to develop a more compassionate and balanced understanding of past events.

Instructions for the Client

1. Identify an Event:

Think of a specific situation in your life that continues to cause you guilt, regret, or shame. Write a brief description of it in the space provided under *Event*.

2. List Contributing Factors:

Identify all the people, events, or circumstances that contributed to what happened. Include yourself, but also think about external influences such as others’ actions, situational pressures, timing, systemic issues, or uncontrollable factors (e.g., illness, lack of information, social context).

3. Create the Responsibility Pie:

Using the blank pie chart, assign a “slice” of the pie to each factor you listed. Make each slice proportional to how much responsibility you think each person or circumstance holds for the outcome.

- The total pie must equal 100%.
- Be as honest and balanced as possible—try to resist giving yourself the entire pie.

4. Reflect on Your Portion:

Once you’ve filled in the chart, note what percentage of responsibility you assigned to yourself. Ask yourself:

- Does this percentage feel fair or exaggerated?
- What evidence supports or challenges this proportion?

5. Reframe and Rebalance:

In the final section, write about what it means to take appropriate responsibility for your part without taking responsibility for things you could not control.

Consider what a fair and compassionate self-assessment might look like and what healthy actions (e.g., apology, boundary-setting, learning) could come from that perspective.

Therapeutic Goals

- Challenge cognitive distortions related to guilt and self-blame.
- Promote a balanced perspective on accountability.
- Foster emotional regulation through cognitive reframing.
- Enhance self-compassion and reduce shame-based thinking.
- Support clients in distinguishing between *responsibility* and *control*.

Processing in Session

After the client completes the worksheet, discuss:

- What they noticed while dividing responsibility.
- Whether their initial allocation changed upon reflection.
- How this reframed understanding affects their emotional response.
- What this insight might mean for self-forgiveness or future behaviour.