📝 Behavioural Experiment guide & form

🎯 Guide to Using the Behavioural Experiment: Testing Assumptions & Building Confidence

Behavioural experiments are a powerful way to test beliefs and assumptions in real-world situations. They can help you challenge negative thoughts, reduce avoidance, and build confidence in trying new behaviours.

Repeating these experiments over time can strengthen not just your beliefs about what's possible, but also your belief in yourself—your capacity to face challenges, manage emotions, and move towards what matters to you.

That said, there's often a quiet obstacle that gets in the way of this process: **safety-seeking behaviours**.

If you're not familiar with the term, safety-seeking behaviours are the things we do—often without even realising it—to avoid distress or discomfort. They might seem helpful in the moment, but they can unintentionally keep distress alive by preventing new learning or reinforcing unhelpful beliefs.

🔍 For example:
Someone with social anxiety might avoid eye contact, rehearse every sentence, or sit near the exit to feel more in control. While these actions offer short-term relief, they also stop the person from discovering that others might accept them as they are, even if they stumble or feel awkward.

Over time, these behaviours keep us locked in old patterns and prevent our brains from learning: *I can cope*. *Things aren't always as dangerous as they seem*.

🧠 I've included a list in this guide to help you **spot your own safety behaviours**—because awareness is the first step toward change.

But it's not just behaviours that trip us up—it's also how we think.

As humans, we rely on **cognitive biases**—mental shortcuts or "thought hacks" that help us quickly interpret the world around us. Life is complex, fast-moving, and full of unknowns, so our brains make automatic judgments to keep us safe and efficient. Most of this happens subconsciously.

While these shortcuts can be helpful, they're not always accurate.

🔎 For example:
If you tend to notice only when things go wrong and overlook your successes, you might be caught in *confirmation bias*—a pattern where your brain selectively focuses on evidence that fits your existing belief (e.g. "I always mess things up"), while ignoring evidence to the contrary.

These mental habits shape how we feel, behave, and interpret events—often without us realising.

📋 That's why I've also included a list of **common cognitive biases** in this guide, so you can start spotting your own patterns and gently questioning them.

A quick exercise before we go further:
Without looking—how many circles can you see around you right now?
Now take a proper look and count them.

It's surprising, isn't it? A reminder that the mind often filters out more than it lets in. Behavioural experiments give us the chance to *look again*—to test assumptions, gather fresh information, and open up to new perspectives that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Follow these steps to design and conduct an effective experiment:

🔍 **Steps to Conduct a Behavioural Experiment:**

1. **Identify the Belief/Assumption to Test**

   ✏️ Write down the negative belief, assumption, thoughts or prediction you want to test.

   Example: "If I speak up in a meeting, people will think I'm incompetent."

2. **Operationalising the Belief**

   🎯 **How to Define and Measure the Belief:**

   o   Break the belief into observable behaviours or outcomes.

   o   Identify specific signs that would confirm or disconfirm the belief.

   o   Consider how someone else could objectively measure this belief. *Example:* "If people think I'm incompetent, they will interrupt me, ignore me, or roll their eyes."

3. **Rate Confidence in the Belief (0-100%)**

   📊 How strongly do you believe this thought?

4. **Plan the Experiment**

   📌 What will you do to test the belief? (e.g., "I will make one comment in the next meeting and observe people's reactions.")

   📍 Where and when will this take place?

   🔮 What do you predict will happen? (e.g., "People will roll their eyes or ignore me.")

   ⚖️ How can you make this a fair test? (e.g., "I will pay attention to different people's reactions, not just one person.")

5. **Identify Cognitive Biases and Safety Behaviours**

   🗯️ **Cognitive Biases:** Are there any thinking patterns that might distort your expectations? *(e.g., catastrophising, mind reading, overgeneralization, confirmation bias)*

   🛡️ **Safety Behaviours:** What things do you usually do to prevent your feared outcome? *(e.g., avoiding eye contact, preparing excessively, staying*

quiet to avoid judgment)

🎯 **Adjusting for Fair Testing:** How can you reduce safety behaviours to get more accurate results?

6. **Conduct the Experiment**

   ✅ Carry out the planned action and note any observations.

7. **Record the Outcome**

   📋 What actually happened?

   🧐 How did people react?

   💭 How did you feel during and after the experiment?

8. **Compare the Outcome with Your Prediction**

   🔄 Was your belief accurate or was it exaggerated?

   ❓ Were there alternative explanations for what happened?

9. **Re-evaluate Your Belief**

   📉 After seeing the evidence, how strongly do you believe your original thought now (0-100%)?

   💡 What is a more balanced or helpful way to think about the situation in the future?

   💪 **What can I do now to strengthen this belief**

📋 **Safety Behaviours and Their Consequences:**

choose what might get in the way of your experiment and let go as best you can

Safety Behaviours	Consequence
Avoiding eye contact	Can reinforce social anxiety and make interactions feel awkward or distant.
Over-preparing	Increases stress and maintains the belief that you cannot handle situations spontaneously.
Staying quiet to avoid judgment	Reduces opportunities for connection and prevents evidence that speaking up is okay.
Seeking reassurance excessively	Can make you dependent on others for validation rather than trusting your own judgment.
Avoiding difficult situations	Reinforces fear and prevents learning that feared situations may not be as bad as expected.
Using distractions to cope with discomfort	Prevents emotional processing and prolongs avoidance patterns.
Apologising excessively	Can undermine confidence and signal to others that you lack self-assurance.
Controlling conversations to prevent silence	Increases anxiety and prevents you from learning that pauses in conversation are natural.
Checking others' reactions constantly	Reinforces mind-reading bias and makes social interactions feel more stressful.
Using safety objects (e.g., phone, headphones)	Prevents full engagement in social situations and keeps anxiety in place.
Add anymore you can think of	

🧠 Cognitive Biases and Their Effects

choose what might get in the way of your experiment and let go as best you can

Cognitive Bias	Effect
Catastrophizing	Exaggerates worst-case scenarios, increasing anxiety and avoidance.
Mind Reading	Assumes others have negative thoughts about you, leading to social withdrawal.
Overgeneralization	Takes one negative event and applies it to all future situations.
Confirmation Bias	Focuses only on evidence that supports negative beliefs, ignoring positives.
Emotional Reasoning	Assumes feelings are facts (e.g., "I feel anxious, so something must be wrong").
Fortune Telling	Predicts negative outcomes without evidence, reinforcing fear.
Black-and-White Thinking	Sees situations as all good or all bad, without middle ground.
Personalization	Takes excessive responsibility for external events.
Discounting the Positive	Dismisses compliments or successes, maintaining negative self-view.
Add anymore you can think of	

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Step	Details
📝 **1. Belief/Assumption to Test**	"If I ask for help, people will think I'm weak."
🎯 **2. Operationalizing the Belief**	- If people think I'm weak, they will sigh, hesitate, or refuse to help.
📊 **3. Confidence in Belief (0-100%)**	80%
📌 **4. Experiment Plan** 📍 **When and where?** ➡️ What will you do? ⚖️ How will you make this a fair test?	At work tomorrow, I will ask a colleague for help with a task. Observe their reaction without looking away or assuming
🎭 **What do you predict will happen?**	"They will be annoyed and think I should know this already."
🧠 **5. Cognitive Biases and Safety Behaviours** ❗ Are there any cognitive biases at play? 🛡️ What safety behaviours might interfere with testing? 🎯 How will you minimize safety behaviours for accurate results?	- Cognitive Bias: Mind reading (assuming others' thoughts) - Safety Behaviour: Hesitating before asking, apologizing excessively - Fair Testing: Ask confidently and observe their reaction without over-apologising
📋 **6. Outcome (What actually happened?)**	Colleague was happy to help and said, "No problem, I've asked for help with this too!"
🔄 **7. Comparison with Prediction**	My prediction was incorrect; they were supportive.
📉 **8. Confidence in Belief After the Experiment (0-100%)**	30%
💡 **9. New Balanced Perspective** 💪 What can I do now to strengthen this belief 💡 What is a more balanced or helpful way to think about the situation in the future?	Asking for help is normal, and people don't mind, people saw me as just another colleague. I need practice this to increase my confidence in this belief.

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📌 **This form can be used in therapy sessions or for personal reflection to gradually shift unhelpful beliefs and reinforce more balanced thinking patterns**