

A **Rules for Living** worksheet is a great CBT exercise to help clients uncover the hidden beliefs that guide their behaviour. These "rules" often develop as protective strategies from childhood or difficult life experiences. They usually sound like:

- "I must..."
- "I should..."
- "I have to..."
- "I can't..."
- "If...then..."

Once identified, these rules can be evaluated to determine whether they are still helpful or whether they are contributing to anxiety, perfectionism, people-pleasing, relationship difficulties, or low self-worth.

Rules for Living Worksheet

Understanding the Hidden Rules That Guide Your Life

Many of us live by unwritten rules we rarely stop to question. These rules often develop from our experiences, family messages, trauma, culture, or relationships. At one time they may have protected us or helped us fit in.

Over time, however, these same rules can become rigid, exhausting, or keep us stuck.

This worksheet will help you identify the rules that may be influencing your thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and relationships.

Step 1: Complete the Statements

Write down the first thing that comes to mind.

I must...

I should...

I have to...

I can't...

I need to...

If I don't...

People should...

Relationships should...

Good people always...

I am only worthy if...

Step 2: Think About Different Areas of Your Life

What rules do you notice in these areas?

Work or School

Relationships

Parenting

Friendships

Body or Appearance

Success

Emotions

Asking for Help

Conflict

Self-Care

Step 3: When Does This Rule Show Up?

Choose one rule that stands out.

My rule is:

When do I notice this rule showing up?

- ☐ At work
- ☐ At home
- ☐ In romantic relationships
- ☐ Around family
- ☐ Around friends
- ☐ During conflict
- ☐ When I make mistakes
- ☐ Other:

Step 4: Where Did This Rule Come From?

This rule may have come from:

- ☐ Childhood experiences
- ☐ Parents or caregivers
- ☐ Trauma
- ☐ Bullying
- ☐ Previous relationships
- ☐ School
- ☐ Culture
- ☐ Religion
- ☐ Society
- ☐ Other:

What experiences taught you this rule?

Step 5: What Happens When You Follow This Rule?

Thoughts

Feelings

Behaviours

Physical Sensations

Short-term benefits

Long-term costs

Step 6: Is This Rule Helpful?

Rate your rule.

How strongly do you believe it?

0 ————— 100

Not at all Completely

How helpful is this rule today?

0 ————— 100

Not Helpful Very Helpful

How flexible is this rule?

☐ Very flexible

☐ Somewhat flexible

☐ Very rigid

Step 7: Examine the Evidence

Evidence that supports this rule

Evidence that does NOT support this rule

What would I tell someone else who believed this rule?

Step 8: What Is This Rule Trying to Protect Me From?

Sometimes our rules are attempts to avoid:

- ☐ Rejection
- ☐ Failure
- ☐ Shame
- ☐ Being hurt
- ☐ Conflict
- ☐ Disappointing others
- ☐ Being abandoned
- ☐ Looking weak
- ☐ Losing control
- ☐ Feeling unsafe
- ☐ Other:

What is this rule trying to protect you from?

Step 9: Create a More Balanced Rule

Instead of:

I could try believing:

Examples:

Instead of...

"I must make everyone happy."

Try...

"I can be kind without taking responsibility for everyone else's emotions."

Instead of...

"I can't make mistakes."

Try...

"Mistakes are part of learning and do not define my worth."

Instead of...

"I should never ask for help."

Try...

"Healthy people ask for support when they need it."

My new balanced rule:

Step 10: Behavioural Experiment

What small action could help you test your new rule this week?

How confident am I?

0 _____ 100

Not confident Very confident

What happened?

What did I learn?

Common Rules for Living

Sometimes seeing examples can help identify your own.

Perfectionism

- I must never make mistakes.
- If I fail, I'm a failure.
- I should always do more.

People-Pleasing

- I must keep everyone happy.
- Saying no is selfish.
- Conflict means something is wrong.

Self-Worth

- I have to earn love.
- My value depends on what I achieve.
- I should never need anyone.

Trauma

- I must always stay alert.
- Trusting people is dangerous.
- If I relax, something bad will happen.

Relationships

- I have to prove I'm lovable.
- If someone is upset, it's my fault.
- I should never be too much.

Anxiety

- I need certainty before acting.
- If I don't worry, I'll miss something important.
- I must always be prepared.

Control

- If I'm not in control, everything will fall apart.
- I should handle everything myself.
- Other people can't be trusted.

Reflection

Many of our rules were created to help us survive difficult experiences. Rather than asking, "**What's wrong with me?**", try asking:

- **What did this rule help me survive?**
- **Does it still serve me today?**
- **What would a healthier, more compassionate rule look like?**

The goal isn't to eliminate every rule—it's to develop **flexible, realistic beliefs** that support your wellbeing instead of restricting it. This allows your behaviour to be guided by your current values rather than old survival strategies.